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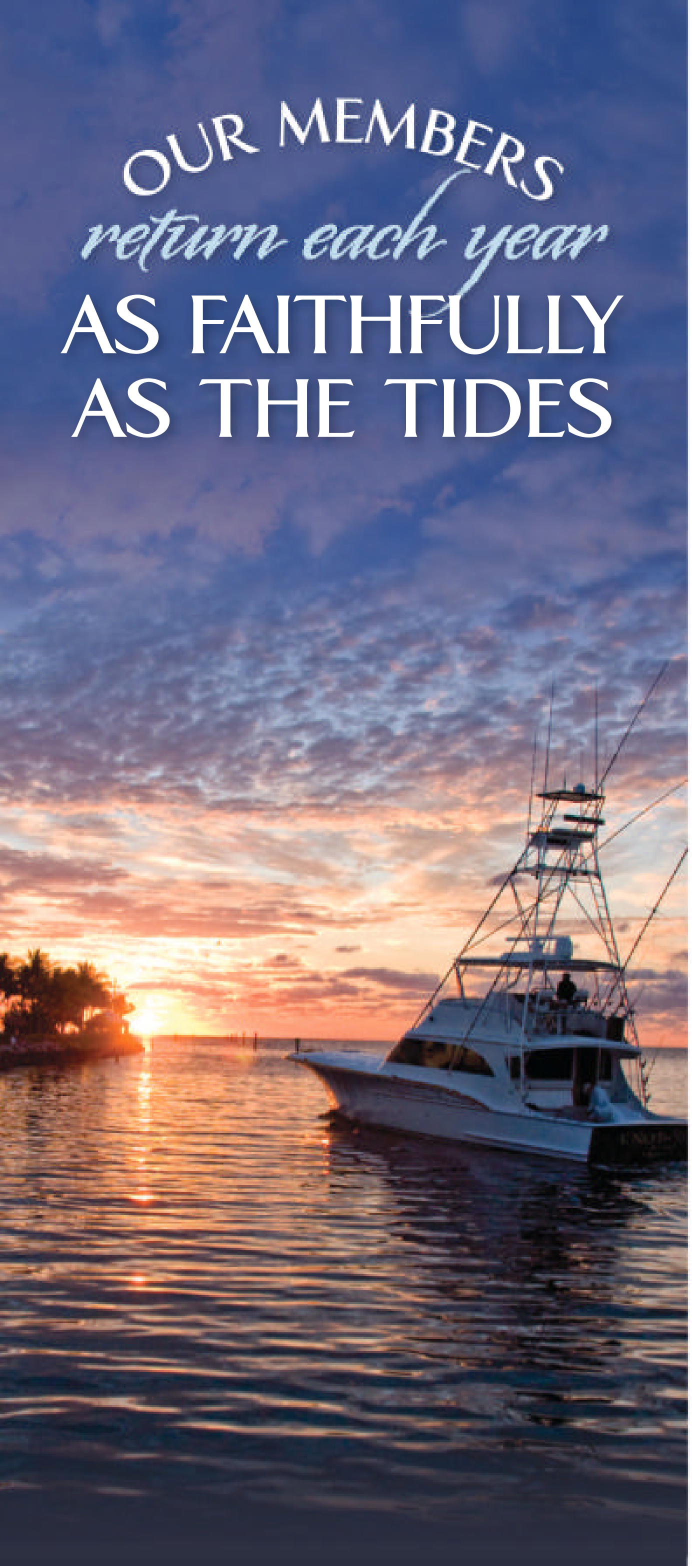

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CARI VANDER YACHT

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THE MAIL

FIT TO PRINT?

I appreciated Rachel Monroe's piece about 3-D-printed construction, but the idea that 3-D printing will solve the homelessness crisis, as some of the subjects of the article believe, seems to me to be misguided ("Build Better," January 23rd). The problem driving homelessness in the U.S. is not primarily one of physical infrastructure—it's one of *legal* infrastructure, namely property law's indifference to whether owners can leave property unused or vacant. Apart from eminent domain or adverse possession—which lead to costly, contentious, and lengthy legal proceedings—there are few legal mechanisms to put these vacant homes to good use, even though millions of houses across the U.S. are currently sitting empty.

The Census Bureau estimates that, as of 2021, roughly 2.7 per cent of all housing units in the United States—3.8 million dwellings—were likely permanently vacant. There are approximately five hundred and eighty thousand involuntarily homeless people in the U.S. Even if each of them were to be placed in one of these houses, we'd still have more than three million empty homes. That number far exceeds any conceivable amount of new development, 3-D-printed or otherwise.

Jacob S. Sherkow
Professor of Law
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Champaign, Ill.

As an architect, I read Monroe's piece with interest. I agree with Jason Ballard, the founder of the startup that Monroe focusses on, that concrete is more environmentally sensitive than is widely believed, but there are several other issues with the material that make it less attractive than Ballard avers.

First, concrete is not very effective at reducing heat flow; phrased in the jargon of construction, it has a very low R-value. A six-inch-thick lightweight concrete wall typically has an R-value of one. By comparison, an insulated wood-framed wall has an R-value of at least fifteen. In California, where I practice, and in many other states with similar rules, a 3-D-printed exterior wall would need several inches of insulation to meet minimum standards. This would require wood or metal framing to achieve a sufficient depth, with drywall or another finish to cover and protect the insulation.

Concrete is also particularly susceptible to failure in seismic events. Almost all concrete construction today is reinforced with steel to give it the necessary tensile strength. The labor-intensiveness of this process drives up concrete's installed cost. Until these problems are solved, 3-D printing will be of limited use in making construction more affordable.

John Wyka
Santa Monica, Calif.

CLOSE READING

I enjoyed Merve Emre's review of John Guillory's "Professing Criticism," but I disagree with her claim that "no reader needs literary works interpreted" anymore (Books, January 23rd). When I was an undergraduate student of comparative literature, in the early nineteen-seventies, I was exposed to many different ways of approaching a text, but my greatest interest was in how a novel or a poem "worked." The methods of reading and responding to literature, art, film, and music that I derived from that experience have continued to reward me. Naïve reading of a text (as when one mistakes a narrator for an author, the example that Emre mentions) can lead to misunderstandings. Readers benefit when they know how the different qualities of a work—such as modes of narration, point of view, irony, and tone—affect its meaning.

Deborah Monahan
North Adams, Mass.

•

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FEBRUARY 8 – 21, 2023

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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Hip-hop was born at a back-to-school party in the Bronx, in 1973, when DJ Kool Herc used two turntables to make the first breakbeat. To celebrate the culture's half-century mark, the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology presents **"Fresh, Fly, and Fabulous: Fifty Years of Hip-Hop Style,"** opening on Feb. 8. The show includes some hundred garments and accessories, from yellow-nubuck Timberland boots (favored by the legendary Notorious B.I.G.) to a red Kangol bucket hat (made iconic by LL Cool J).

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANNAH WHITAKER

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

DANCE

New York City Ballet

Two programs alternate on the week of Feb. 7, one of new and newish works, and the other mainly of company staples by Jerome Robbins and Balanchine. In the prior category, a new ballet by Keerati Jinakunwiphat, a dancer with Kyle Abraham's A.I.M, set to a score by the contemporary Chinese American composer Du Yun, shares a program with works by Alexei Ratmansky ("Voices") and Justin Peck ("Everywhere We Go"). And, in the latter, Robbins's classic wartime ballet "Fancy Free" and Balanchine's spikily modernist "Episodes" bookend two shorter works. Then the company launches into two weeks (Feb. 15-26) of "Sleeping Beauty," a jewel of the nineteenth-century classical repertoire, in a respectable, though insufficiently resplendent, 1991 staging, by N.Y.C.B.'s former director Peter Martins. One of the highlights of the evening-length ballet is a delightful Garland Waltz, composed for scores of dancers (including kids from the company's school) by Balanchine, in 1981.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; through Feb. 26.)*

American Modern Opera Company

The company performs the New York première of Carolyn Chen's "How to Fall Apart." It's a multidisciplinary work for violin, cello, and three dancers which incorporates text alongside movement and music. It is also a meditation on disintegration in many forms, from the effects of aging on the body to the effects of climate change on the planet. The L.A.-based composer is known for her tendency to combine everyday sounds (such as paper being ripped) with traditional orchestral instruments. In Chen's world, movement, music-making, and the spoken word become one, each element merging organically with the others.—*M.H. (Baryshnikov Arts Center; Feb. 10-11.)*

Hubbard Street Dance Chicago

In its forty-fifth year, the company remains one of the country's leading repertory troupes, fielding state-of-the-art dancers in on-trend works. This visit to the Joyce is the first under the artistic directorship of Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell, once a standout dancer with the Alvin Ailey company. So far, no major shift in taste is evident. The newest work is "As the Wind Blows," a pick-me-up piece by Amy Hall Garner. Also on the program: a solo by Kyle Abraham, duets by Spenser Theberge and by Ohad Naharin ("B/olero"), and Aszure Barton's "BUSK."—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Feb. 14-19.)*

Kinetic Light

The innovative disability arts ensemble brings "Under Momentum" to Lincoln Center. In wheelchairs, Alice Sheppard and Laurel Lawson move up and down a series of specially designed ramps, playing with gravity, torque, and the need for speed, sometimes upending themselves and each other acrobatically. As with all Kinetic Light performances, this one is robustly and thoughtfully accessible, with A.S.L. interpreters, audio descriptions, and much more.—*B.S. (Clark Studio Theatre; Feb. 17-19.)*

"The Night Falls"

Not many choreographers collaborate with fiction writers. But for this new dance-opera, presented by Peak Performances, the Ballet Collective choreographer Troy Schumacher and composer Ellis Ludwig-Leone have teamed up with Karen Russell. The setting will be familiar to fans of her fiction: a Florida at once phantasmagorical and kitschy. There, sirens beckon a diverse group of sufferers, split into dancer and singer selves, who tell each other their stories, as in the Decameron, and find commonality to resist the seduction of despair. Ludwig-Leone's ingenious, gorgeous score manages to suggest both the siren song and its antidote. Schumacher's choreography, less convincingly, makes empathy visible.—*B.S. (Alexander Kasser Theatre, Montclair, N.J.; Feb. 9-12.)*

Rennie Harris Puremovement

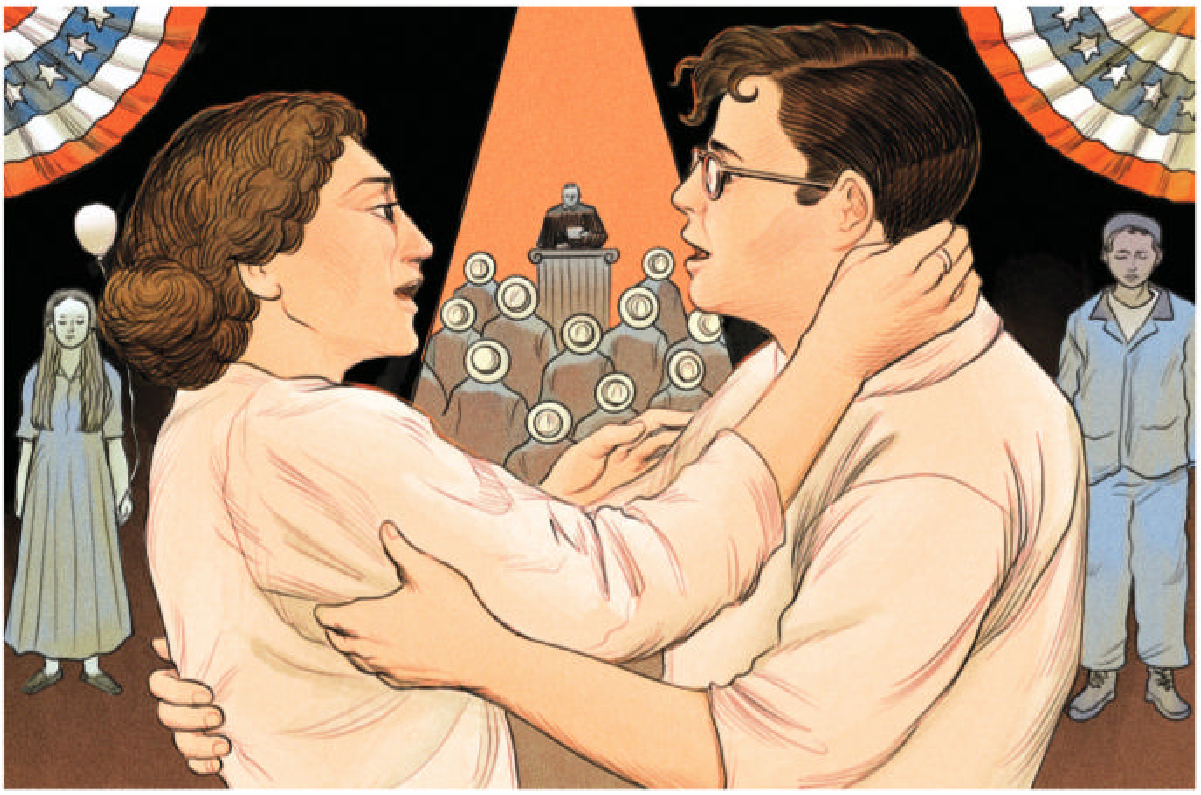
"Rome & Jewels," which débuted in 2000, was Rennie Harris's first full-length work. To call it a hip-hop "Romeo and Juliet"—with the warring families transposed into battling Philadelphia gangs, via spoken word, b-boying, and d.j.s—suggests its story, verve, and style but not its imagination. Jewels, the Juliet figure, is invisible, only implied, representing the elusiveness of love as an escape from the aggression of the street. Harris was figuring out how to extend into more complex emotions and choreographic forms. A restaging at the Joyce offers a chance to return to his breakthrough.—*B.S. (Joyce Theatre; Feb. 7-12.)*

THE THEATRE

Colin Quinn: Small Talk

Colin Quinn has aged, delightfully, into his grumpiness. He's skeptical—can you believe it?—about social media. He mocks his untucked shirt and sneakers. "I'm an old man," he grumbles, "dressed like a twelve-year-old boy." Quinn's beloved stage persona, tailored and then washed soft by a million tour dates, is the Brooklyn stoop philosopher, the Irish American blue-collar sage. Cantankerousness is, therefore, what the audience has come to see. After a decade of finely tuned comedy specials (filmed for Netflix and HBO), Quinn's comparatively

ON BROADWAY



In 1913, in Georgia, a Jewish factory manager named Leo Frank was tried and convicted for the rape and murder of a thirteen-year-old girl who worked for him. The case became a media magnet and fanned Southern antisemitism; after Frank's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, a lynch mob hanged him from a tree. Decades later, this grisly tale became the basis for the musical drama **"Parade,"** with a score by Jason Robert Brown and a book by Alfred Uhry (a great-nephew of the factory owner). The show opened on Broadway in late 1998 and lasted just two months, but it retained a cult following and helped make Brown a leading light of contemporary musical theatre. A Broadway revival, which originated as a New York City Center gala presentation last year, begins previews on Feb. 21, at the Jacobs, directed by Michael Arden. Ben Platt, last seen weeping his way through "Dear Evan Hansen," stars as Leo, alongside Micaela Diamond, as his wife, Lucille.—*Michael Schulman*

OPPOSITE: SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE MUSEUM AT F.I.T.; RIGHT: ILLUSTRATION BY JULIE BENBASSAT

COUNTRY

Since winning the fourth season of "American Idol," the singer-songwriter **Carrie Underwood** has stood as one of country music's most bankable stars, a generational voice that is nearly synonymous with "Sunday Night Football" and the crossover single. "Cry Pretty," from 2018, made Underwood the only woman to top the Billboard 200 four times with country albums, in a run marked by extravagant ballads and woman-scorned kiss-offs. The pandemic years brought new ventures—a Christmas record and HBO Max special, a roots-gospel anthology, and a Las Vegas residency. Last year, however, she returned to her buffed country-pop throne with "Denim & Rhinestones," a brassy arena album of roadhouse rock fit for her show at Madison Square Garden, on Feb. 21.—*Sheldon Pearce*

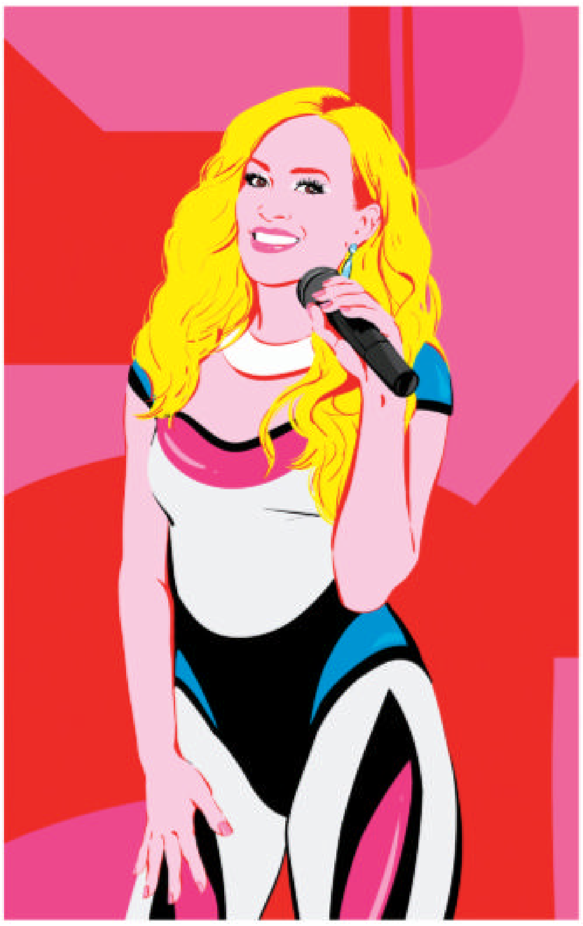


ILLUSTRATION BY AGNÈS RICART

loose recent outing, directed by James Fauvell, feels like a club set barely disguised as a show. Though some of his observations sparkle, his topics—the vanishing art of small talk (as a lubricant for society) and how we use it to form (or to fake) a personality—don't give him much of a spine for the evening. He seems to sense that. One of his endearing qualities as a storyteller has always been the way that he bum-rushes his own punch lines, but this time his embarrassed are-you-gonna-make-me-say-it delivery rushes so fast the words collide.—*Helen Shaw (Lucille Lortel; through Feb. 11.)*

Sugar Daddy

When people speak of theatre as catharsis, they're usually thinking of the audience. Not Sam Morrison, whose standup-style "Sugar Daddy" opens Off Broadway, after premièring at last year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. He welcomes the audience as his "grief group," explaining that talking about the still raw loss of his boyfriend is easier onstage than off. It's mourning as comedy. "What is trauma but unmonetized content?" he asks, jokingly branding himself as an anxious, gay, Jewish diabetic. The show's title, it turns out, refers to a glucose monitor that he wears, as well as to his dead partner, an older man. The anxiousness surfaces in Morrison's occasionally stumbling delivery, but his openness and wit more than offset it, and ultimately his catharsis and the audience's laughter draw everyone together in tragedy and comedy's borderland, more commonly known as life.—*Dan Stahl (SoHo Playhouse; through Feb. 17.)*

Without You

If you can tell me, without doing the math, that five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes make up a year, then you, too, have probably heard "Seasons of Love," Jonathan Larson's anthem from "Rent," many times. You hear it again in the beginning, middle, and end of Anthony Rapp's solo show, which weaves together a song-filled account of his coming to star in the groundbreaking rock opera—he includes "Losing My Religion," which he sang at his audition, for example—and of two losses that he suffered during the musical's rocket-like ascent. One of those bereavements is well known: Larson's sudden, fatal collapse, in 1996—the other was the death of Rapp's mother, the following year. Some will simply be happy to hear Rapp being vulnerable and singing the familiar "Rent" hits again, but he wrote about this difficult time more wisely in his memoir of the same title. This cabaret, directed by Steven Maler, is an odd mix of fan service (he pauses for applause at the news that Larson won a Pulitzer . . . nearly thirty years ago) and mawkish self-regard—we learn so little about his mother, we never even find out her name.—*H.S. (New World Stages; through April 30.)*

MUSIC

Codeine

ROCK During its original incarnation, in the early-nineties underground, the doom-laden New York band Codeine issued two LPs, "Frigid Stars" and "The White Birch." Listen to Stephen Immerwahr's dour poetry, John Engle's tolling guitars, and Chris Brokaw's glacial drumming, and picture falling snow. The sound, which typified the slowcore indie-rock subgenre, is so chilling, precise, and beguilingly extreme—shy, then crashing—that it recalibrates the vast spaces around each inquisitive note. It becomes an exploration of tone and tension, and a desolate meditation. Last year, a session recorded in 1992, between the group's pair of albums, was unearthed by the Chicago archival label Numero Group and released under the title "Dessau." Codeine's appearances this week mark a rare opportunity to be blanketed by its austere noise.—*Jenn Pelly (Union Pool; Feb. 11-12.)*

"Jungle Archive Collection"

DRUM 'N' BASS In the nineties, British drum-'n'-bass producers created so much music that a good many tracks were waylaid—sometimes pressed in tiny editions of twelve-inch acetate that could withstand only a few dozen plays, but never fully released. The two-volume "Jungle Archive Collection" assembles nearly four hours' worth of these sorts of rarities, culled from a handful of labels based in Bristol—notably More Rockers, the imprint of the compilation's producer, Rob Smith. Unsurprisingly, the results vary, from bare sketches to blooming would-be anthems. But the ferment that yielded this bounty brimmed with an excitement that remains audible.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Streaming on select platforms.)*

Kiwi Jr.

ROCK Jeremy Gaudet, the vocalist helming Kiwi Jr., sings with a disarming flair that's simultaneously wry and vulnerable; his personality—an instrument louder than the guitars and keyboards—floods every corner of the Toronto indie quartet's recordings. Although his delivery bears more than a passing resemblance to that of Pavement's Stephen Malkmus, Gaudet adds a nerdy twist, navigating an emotional spectrum through a prism molded by pop culture. On the recent "Chopper," this fertile band's third LP since it débuted, in 2019, the singer summons Julie Andrews, Outkast, "Parasite," and the Superman architect Joe Shuster to evoke trepidation, nostalgia, envy, and elusive sentiments that slip between the cracks. Where the lyrics weave puzzles, Kiwi Jr.'s music cuts a straighter line, with tightly designed pop songs that seem to detonate in tiny private explosions.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Berlin; Feb. 10.)*

New York Philharmonic

CLASSICAL In the not-so-distant past, some of classical music's most central figures—Bernstein, Boulez, Strauss, Mahler—were composers who conducted; Esa-Pekka Salonen, whose music swirls and shines in cryptic ways, maintains that tradition today. He leads the New York Philharmonic in the U.S. première of one of his own pieces, "Kínēma," with the ensemble's principal clarinettist, Anthony McGill, as the featured soloist. Berio's blithesome arrangement of Boccherini's "Ritirata Notturna di Madrid" and Beethoven's Seventh Symphony fill out the program, and after the run's final performance Salonen curates a late-night cabaret-style concert in the company's "Nightcap" series.—*Oussama Zahr (David Geffen Hall; Feb. 8-11.)*

Dianne Reeves: "Love Is in the Air"

JAZZ Authority may not be the spiciest ingredient that a jazz singer can call on to flavor the pot, but when you are in the presence of a genuine vocal diva like Dianne Reeves, you gladly accept expertise as its own reward. Reeves doesn't embrace radically uncommon repertoire and atypical approaches, but you'd be hard-pressed to find another jazz chanteuse with such commanding technical resources or compelling interpretive powers. She calls to mind old-school virtuosos

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like Sarah Vaughan, and there are certainly worse models; the performer takes control of a stage and doesn't let go until the final encore. Reeves's Valentine's Day concerts bring out the romantic in her, shading her extravagant gifts in warming tones.—*Steve Futterman (Rose Theatre; Feb. 10-11.)*

ART

Myrlande Constant

Historically, the Haitian art of sewing *drapos,* or vodou flags, was dominated by men. Enter Myrlande Constant, whose astonishing textiles are on view at Fort Gansevoort through March 11. In the early nineteen-nineties, the artist left her job at a wedding-dress factory in Port-au-Prince and took up the form—revolutionizing it in the process. Constant adds beads to her compositions, alongside the traditional sequins, using a tambour embroidery stitch that yields both unprecedented intricacy and pictorial depth. You could say that Constant was born to the practice she calls "painting with beads": her mother was a seamstress and her father was a vodou priest. Now her children assist in the production of her epic pieces, which can take up to six months to complete. The nine-foot-wide "Apres Gran Met La Fey Nan Bwa Se Tretmant Yo Viy," from 2022, pays homage to both the ceremonial and the secular sides of plant medicine. With distinctions between so-called outsiders and M.F.A.-minted insiders becoming increasingly moot, Constant's moment has arrived. Last year, she was in the Venice Biennale's acclaimed exhibition "The Milk of Dreams," and in March she'll be the first Haitian woman to have a solo museum show in the U.S., at U.C.L.A.—*Andrea K. Scott (Fort Gansevoort; through March 11.)*

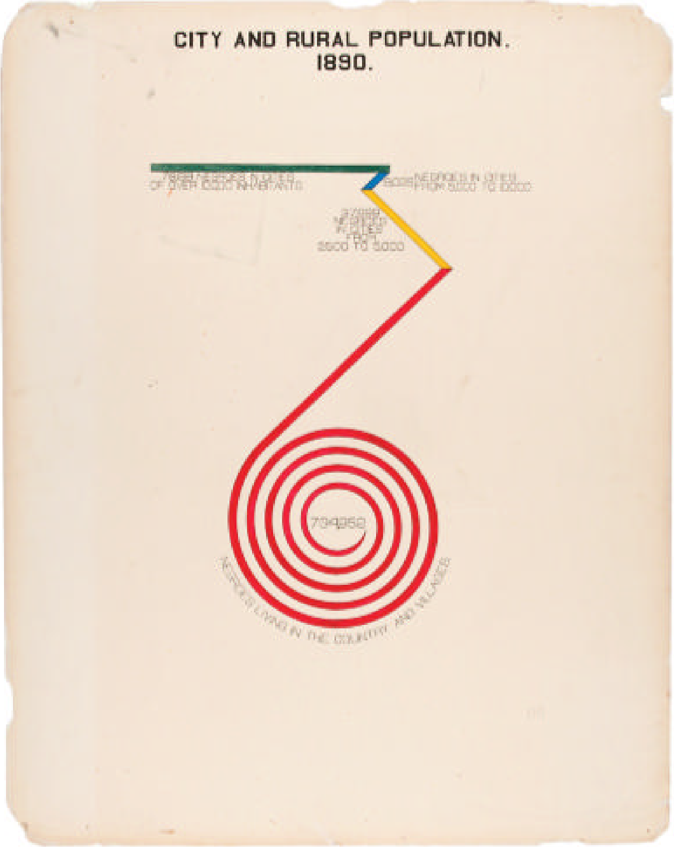
"Edward Hopper's New York"

It's amazing to see, in this terrific show at the Whitney, how Edward Hopper mined his relatively narrow experience to produce works that still feel wide-ranging and universal, if only because loneliness is universal, and, for Hopper, it's what unites us as human beings, if there is such a thing as unity. The premise of the exhibition, curated with great intelligence and care by Kim Conaty, is that New York was the American painter's primary muse. But it took him a long time to figure out what he loved most about her: not what was visible but what wasn't revealed, her many absences. Hopper's New York is not a city that you can enter, or be a citizen of, even when his paintings involve the presence of other people, as does "The Sheridan Theatre" (1937). The painting is a series of brown and amber and yellow curves—railings, light fixtures, and offstage spaces—that go up and up to a balcony, perhaps, or to a celestial realm? In any case, it is suffused with darkness. Standing at the right of the frame is a female figure looking at something we cannot see, and though it's one of Hopper's more populated paintings—there are three figures in the aisle to her left—all we can discern, in that half-light, is what's not there. Maybe she's watching a movie set in New York? Perhaps a scene with lovers in the park, or the city's skyline, its buildings filled with all kinds of people, bathed in moonlight, alienation, and joy.—*Hilton Als (Whitney Museum; through March 5.)*

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Two of the four installations in this museum-worthy exhibition (organized in partnership with the Andrea Rosen gallery) were conceived by Gonzalez-Torres in 1994-95 but never realized until now—nearly three decades after the Cuban American artist died, of AIDS-related causes, in 1996, at the age of thirty-eight. One of these works is "Untitled (Sagitario)," a stunning architectural intervention: a pair of shallow reflecting pools, each twelve feet in diameter. (At first glance, they appear to be holes excised in the gallery floor, an uncanny effect.) The edges of the pools almost meet, separated by a razor-thin membrane of concrete, conjuring both a threat of contamination and a longing for touch. In the other never-before-seen piece, two side-by-side billboards face in opposite directions, spotlit and accompanied by sound. The front of each "performer" in this duo is a photograph of a cloudy sky, dotted with a single bird; their versos expose rough wood. It suggests a grieving addendum to the artist's other, well-known public-art billboards. "Untitled (Public Opinion)," from 1991 (on loan from the Guggenheim), is a rectangular floor piece made of seven-hundred pounds of cellophane-wrapped black-licorice candies. As with much of Gonzalez-Torres's work, a range of associations and emotions arise: glittering carapaces, glamorous black-sequinned fabric, minimalist art's reliance on repetition, and the site of a mass grave all come to mind.—*Johanna Fateman (Zwirner; through Feb. 25.)*

IN THE MUSEUMS



The heart of the exhibition **"Deconstructing Power: W. E. B. Du Bois at the 1900 World's Fair,"** on view at the Cooper Hewitt through May 29, is a selection of twenty of the remarkable infographics that Du Bois and his sociology students at Atlanta University, in Georgia, made for the Paris Exposition. In their hand-drawn diagrams (including "City and Rural Population 1890," from 1900, above), the collaborators found brilliant ways to measure positive developments for Black Americans without diminishing the scale of slavery's horror. "Proportion of Freemen and Slaves Among American Negroes" is among the most visually elegant charts—and one of the most indicting. A graph, marking the decades from 1790 to 1870 on its horizontal axis, presents a narrow strip of green sky (indicating free people) above a mountain of black (representing those who were enslaved), which reaches a stark drop-off in 1865. A concurrent exhibition, "Hector Guimard: How Paris Got Its Curves," reveals the ways in which the 1900 World's Fair was otherwise a centennial shoring-up of Eurocentrism and white supremacy, linking the data visualizations with the simultaneously emerging aesthetics of Art Nouveau, as seen in Guimard's designs (most famously, the entrances to the Paris Métro). The connection between brutal European colonialism and the decorative arts is highlighted most acutely through the sinuous curlicues of the era. In Belgium—at a time when the Belgians were committing atrocities in the Congo—the ornamental S-curve was called "the whiplash line."—*Johanna Fateman*

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MOVIES

Cane River

This 1982 drama, long believed lost and rediscovered in 2014, is the only feature by Horace B. Jenkins, who died soon after its completion. It's centered on the romance of a young Black man, Peter Metoyer (Richard Romain), a recent college graduate and a poet who returns to his family's farm in rural Louisiana, and a local tour guide named Maria Mathis (Tommye Myrick), a twenty-two-year-old Black woman who, desperate to escape small-town life, is about to leave home for college. Maria comes from a poor family descended from enslaved Africans; Peter comes from a landowning Creole family (including mixed-race ancestors who owned slaves), and their relationship is strained by the groups' long-standing social differences. Their rides on horseback through the countryside, their walks in town, and their jaunts in Peter's sports car have a hearty, sun-drenched swing—but it's a dialectical swing. Jenkins's spare, frank lyricism foregrounds the couple's tense, principled, and pain-filled discussions about the traumas of history, the weight of cultural memory, and the pressure of racial injustice; he lends the intimate tale a vast and vital resonance.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, the Criterion Channel, and other services.)*

Mikey and Nicky

Nicky (John Cassavetes), a small-time gangster, is holed up in a Philadelphia flophouse, hiding from a hit man. His lifelong friend and Mob companion, Mikey (Peter Falk), shows up to help him out—or to sell him out. In the course of their apocalyptic overnight ramble, the two men act out a lifetime of unresolved passions, petty grievances, and buried aggressions, with special attention to their harsh and blundering relationships with wives and lovers. This hard-nosed masterpiece, from 1976, was written and directed by the doyenne of loopy comedy, Elaine May, who borrowed the scarily intense and spontaneous performance style of Cassavetes's films to expose the cruelty of their male bravado—the ugliness of what his men do to women and what his women take from men. Nicky, with his sneering smile, scrambles all night long in frantic terror and comic wrath; Mikey suffers savagely from his own conflicting loyalties. The wild emotional swings render the inevitable conclusion all the more shattering, as the film lays bare the price of friendship and the gall of betrayal. In May's view, it takes a real man to stop being one of the guys.—*R.B. (Screening Feb. 12 and Feb. 18 at Museum of the Moving Image and streaming on HBO Max, the Criterion Channel, Kanopy, and other services.)*

The Tailor of Panama

John Boorman directed this messy adaptation, from 2001, of the John le Carré novel. As Andy Osnard, Pierce Brosnan plays an anti-Bond: the spy who loves nobody except himself. He is sent to Panama, where he recruits a local tailor, Harry Pendel (Geoffrey Rush)—who, like so many le Carré creations, has constructed the story of himself to escape from a shameful, secret past. On the evidence of Harry's tips, Osnard urges London and Washington to back a democratic coup to the tune of several million dollars. Almost no one in this picture is free of corruption, whether moral, sexual, or financial; the only virtuous character, Harry's wife, Louisa (Jamie Lee Curtis), is barely allowed room to breathe. Boorman wants to turn the novel's rueful satire into something sharp and sweaty, but the tone veers all over the place, and the plot feels like reckless fantasy. With Catherine McCormack as the target of Osnard's lust and Harold Pinter as Harry's uncle Benny; indeed, the film's view of Central American politics could hardly be more Pinterish.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 4/2/01.) (Streaming on HBO Max, Prime Video, and other services.)*

To Leslie

Andrea Riseborough, in the title role, invigorates every beat of this heartfelt but hackneyed drama, about an alcoholic woman in free fall. Leslie, who was the toast of her small Texas town when she won a lottery jackpot, drank it all away. With nowhere else to go, she moves in with her grown son (Owen Teague) in a nearby city, wrecks that relationship, and lands back in her home town. Soon finding herself friendless and homeless, she's given a room and a job by a kindly motel manager (Marc Maron) and struggles to rebuild her life. Riseborough makes a virtuoso display of the script's gamut of screen clichés, ranging from loud aggression and wheedling sweetness to humbled desperation and proud defiance; flashbacks to better times offer her little to do but whoop and holler. An array of stock characters—exasperated friends, mocking neighbors, predators—is portrayed by a noteworthy cast that includes Allison Janney and Stephen Root; Andre Royo is relegated to a role of cartoonish comedy. The director, Michael Morris, leaves the actors no respite from his overbearing emphases.—*R.B. (Streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

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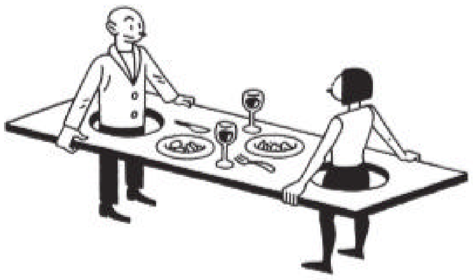
ON THE BIG SCREEN

COURTESY MARIAH GARNETT

There's a wide variety of first-person films on display in BAM's "True to Life" series (running Feb. 17-23), and one of the most original of them is Mariah Garnett's **"Trouble,"** from 2019. The title refers to the danger that Garnett's father, David Coleman, faced in the late sixties and early seventies, amid the Troubles, in his native Belfast. Raised Protestant, the teen-age Coleman was engaged to a Catholic woman; the couple was the subject of a television news broadcast, leading to threats of violence against him and prompting him to flee the country. Garnett travels to Coleman's adoptive city of Vienna to make this film about him. (For reasons undisclosed, she'd never met him before.) Coleman, who's still burdened by his bitter memories, talks with Garnett on camera—but, when he refuses to join her on a trip to Belfast, the filmmaker, visiting sites of her father's youth, portrays him there in reënactments. Garnett delivers her commentary, complete with stories of making the film, in the form of subtitles. Using archival clips, documentary footage, and interviews, she reveals the enduring fears and hatreds that threaten the peace in Northern Ireland and divide her extended family to this day.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Urban Hawker

135 W. 50th St.

At the beginning of the Singapore episode of the Netflix show "Street Food: Asia," K. F. Seetoh, the Singaporean curator of the new midtown food hall Urban Hawker, sets the scene. "We've got no language," he says. "We don't have a national costume like all of our neighbors. So nothing roots you"—big pause for effect—"except for food." This food is defined not only by particular dishes and styles of cooking (an eclectic mix born of immigrants from all over Asia and beyond) but also by where it's made: at hawker centers—open-air food courts—which are collectively inscribed on UNESCO's list of "the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity."

Seetoh, a photojournalist and writer who found his calling in starting what he describes as a street-food-advocacy company, was a friend and collaborator of Anthony Bourdain's, and a consultant on a Singaporean-inspired food hall that Bourdain was once planning. (It fell apart before his death, in 2018.) Urban Hawker (under the umbrella of the food-hall operator Urbanspace) is an edited version of Bourdain's grander, more international concept: a collection of stalls imported directly from Singapore, with some local businesses thrown in.

As in Singapore, the menu at each of Urban Hawker's stalls is small and specialized. Hainan Jones (co-owned by Seetoh) offers little but Hainanese chicken rice, one of Singapore's most ubiquitous dishes. Behind a narrow counter, whole birds are poached in chicken broth, then plunged into an ice bath. The meat, carved into neat, juicy segments, is served at room temperature with hot rice (steamed in more broth and seasoned with lemongrass, pandan leaves, and ginger), plus cabbage soup and condiments: a lime-garlic-ginger chili sauce and a black-caramel soy sauce. It's easy to see why a Singaporean pastry chef featured in "Street Food: Asia" describes eating it every day for lunch and marrying the man who served it to her.

The daily consumption of chili crab, another Singaporean standard, available at a stall called Wok & Staple, seems less advisable—not least because a single Dungeness crab will set you back about sixty dollars. As an occasional treat, it's delightful: a tangle of legs, whose hard shells crack open to reveal succulent meat, swimming in a ruddy stew of sambal, tomato paste, ginger, onion, and silky wisps of egg, to be sopped up with sweet fried *mantou*, tiny, fluffy buns with crackly, golden exteriors. Flip over the crab's enormous carapace to scrape out the guts, which taste like a tantalizingly funky sausage.

At other stalls, you'll find wonton noodle soup (Dim Sum Darling); biryani and *murtabak*, a stuffed flatbread (Mamak's Corner); and curry rice with scissor-cut fried chicken and fish-and-chips (Smokin' Joe). None of those would quite draw me back, but I'd certainly call again on Mr. Fried Rice, especially for a version of the eponymous dish that comes topped with shrimp-paste-battered fried chicken. At Prawnaholic Collections, I loved the *char kway teow*—wide noodles, fish cake, sweet Chinese sausage, shrimp, and morsels of fried pork fat, all slicked in a sweet soy sauce—and a soup crowded with shrimp and silky, falling-off-the-bone pork ribs, plus fish cake and egg noodles, in a fragrant, cloudy broth. At Lady Wong, an outpost of a New York-based bakery, I was especially taken with the rainbow *kueh lapis*, a beautiful steamed Indonesian layer cake made with tapioca and rice flours, coconut milk, and pandan extract, the rare example of a whimsical dessert that tastes as good as it looks.

The *kueh lapis* is a metaphor, perhaps, for Urban Hawker. You might mistake it for any of the other flashy food halls that have opened in New York in recent years, which tend to feel corporate and forced, with a random mix of stalls serving food that seems phoned in, even from legacy restaurants. But Urban Hawker, as a more effective expression of the essence of Singaporean food than any single restaurant could be, has a point of view, and that makes all the difference. *(Dishes $1.85-$59.80.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

PHOTOGRAPH BY YUDI ELA FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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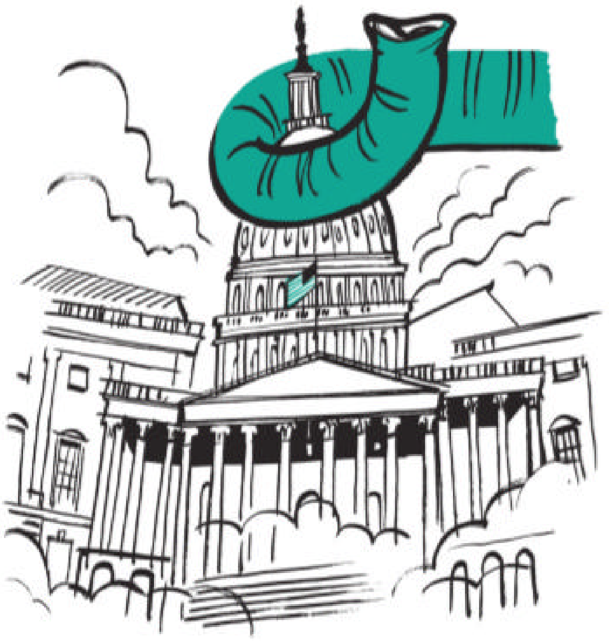
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
HITTING THE CEILING

On an August afternoon nearly twelve years ago, Vice-President Joe Biden strode out of a meeting with the House Democratic Caucus to speak to reporters. “If we had our way, and there was a different circumstance in the Congress, we would be talking, and should be talking, right now about job-creation issues,” he said. “But there is a sort of Sword of Damocles hanging over everyone’s head”—he swung a pen back and forth to illustrate—“this is the debt limit.” The G.O.P., which had recently gained control of the House, was refusing to raise the limit, the legal ceiling on the amount the United States can borrow, unless there were substantial cuts to social programs. Markets had fallen on the possibility that the nation would default on its obligations, including paying the interest on Treasury bonds—thus potentially triggering a worldwide financial crisis. Biden had negotiated a compromise package with, among others, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor and Mitch McConnell, then the Senate Minority Leader, and in the end he helped sell the resulting deal to those House and Senate Democrats who saw it as a surrender.

Biden is again at the center of a debt-limit crisis; it’s a Washington drama that seems to play on a loop. McConnell is still around, too, though he has ceded the negotiations to Kevin McCarthy, the new Speaker of the House, who met with President Biden last Wednesday. McConnell told reporters, “We’re all behind Kevin, wishing him well.” For anybody who had watched the protracted, humiliating spectacle of the speakership election, that bit of cheerleading sounded empty. McCarthy yielded power to the most extreme members of his caucus; among other things, they gained a greater ability to block a deal.

In 2011, the talks were taking place well after the Treasury had effectively hit the ceiling, and was resorting to “extraordinary measures” to avoid a default. These actions included delaying investments in federal employees’ pension funds, but what they added up to was grand-scale scrounging. (In 1953, during an earlier debt-limit crisis, the federal government sold off gold coins and bullion that were sitting in its vaults—the change between the cushions of the national couch.) Similarly, Janet Yellen, the Secretary of the Treasury, informed Congress that the U.S. would be pressing up against the ceiling as of January 19th; it may be a few months before she has exhausted all the options. From the point of view of other advanced economies, such maneuvers are unstable and, fiscally speaking, pretty weird. (There is always talk of minting a trillion-dollar platinum coin to deposit in the government’s account at the Fed.) As with so much in American politics currently, the emergency has become deceptively familiar.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

During the Trump Administration, there were three suspensions of the ceiling on the debt, which rose, during those years, from about nineteen trillion to twenty-seven trillion dollars (and is now more than thirty-one). Republicans, nonetheless, are again threatening to use the limit to break the economy if they don’t get what they want. But in 2011 they at least had a rough idea of what they were after. The current G.O.P. cast is more akin to a room of people shouting different and sometimes contradictory demands.

Some swear that they will protect defense spending, but maybe not for what Representative Jim Jordan calls the Pentagon’s “woke policies”; Senator Rand Paul, meanwhile, wants to take a hundred billion dollars from the military. Representative Anna Paulina Luna wants a balanced-budget amendment, no Social Security or Medicare cuts, *and* no tax increases. (“Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” she told NBC News.) Twenty-four G.O.P. senators signed a letter to Biden demanding unspecified “structural reforms”; among the senators were newly elected Trumpists, such as J. D. Vance and Ted Budd, who seem to see the debt-limit fight as an ideological testing ground. One could be forgiven for thinking that, for some, economic chaos is not a risk but the goal. Representative Greg Pence (the former Vice-President's brother) told CNN that he wouldn't vote to raise the limit even if he got everything he wanted. Representative Chip Roy thinks that the debt limit shouldn't be raised until all asylum seekers can be kept in detention centers.

What's remarkable, given that the Republicans are basically brainstorming a ransom letter, is how often they insert notes of fiscal sanctimony. "The debt ceiling is literally the nation's credit card—it's got a maximum," Representative Steve Scalise said. It is literally not the nation's credit card. When a card is maxed out, you can't keep ordering goods and services, but Congress can, and does. The Treasury is not exceeding the debt limit because it has gone on a rogue shopping spree; it is trying to cover the spending that Congress has already approved. A better analogy would be someone who, faced with financial commitments—utilities, rent, child support—simply decides not to pay.

One distinctive, and alarming, aspect of the current crisis is the insistence in Republican circles that a version of this scenario might be just fine. The euphemism for this position is "payment prioritization." The idea is that the Treasury can delay the global-financial-collapse moment by paying only the interest on its bonds and ignoring its other bills—such as salaries for soldiers, Social Security payments, and school lunches. There are technical problems with this scheme: the Treasury's payment system is not reliably set up to stop some checks and not others, and it may not even have the legal power to do so. There are also obvious political and moral issues involved in deciding which payments are most important. But the idea itself is a fantasy. It's not as though international markets would fail to notice that the U.S. was no longer standing by its non-bond financial obligations. Any lapse in payments, Yellen said, "is effectively a default." And, at some point, the money still runs out.

A number of Republican lawmakers have referred to the limit as "leverage," which amounts to an admission that they believe they are owed some kind of tribute in lieu of a default. High-stakes blackmail requires party discipline, however, and the G.O.P. leadership has not shown that it can exert such control when it needs to. The question about our perennial debt-ceiling crisis might remain tediously the same: Is the G.O.P. really reckless enough to go through with its threats? This time, though, there's a different Republican Party, and there may be a different answer.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

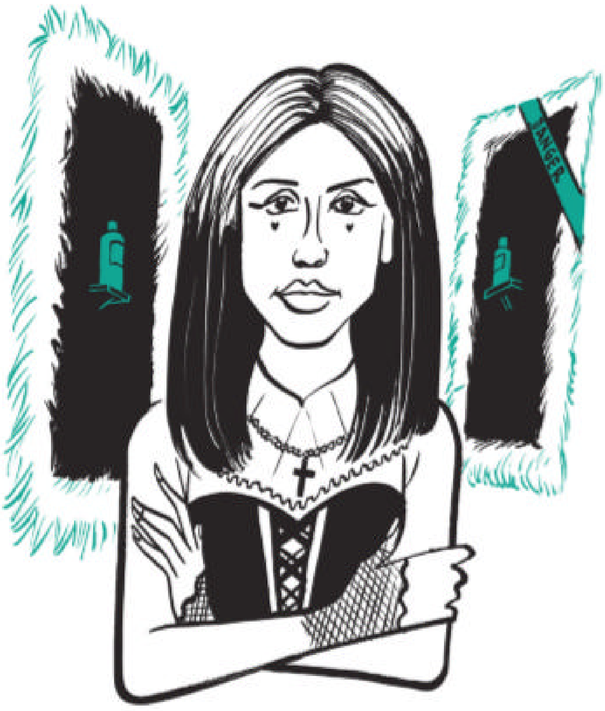
LOS ANGELES POSTCARD
PRAYERS FOR PUTIN

The other day, Nadya Tolokonnikova, a founder of the feminist art collective Pussy Riot—known for festive candy-colored balaclavas and for spirited opposition to Vladimir Putin—was in L.A. for a performance and the opening of the group's first solo show, at Jeffrey Deitch Gallery. Tolokonnikova, who is, according to Putin's Justice Ministry, a foreign agent, strives for geo-anonymity. She said, "I cannot tell you any details of my recent moves around the territory of the Earth. I cannot confirm or deny that I left Russia, that I reside in Europe or the U.S. or Australia. Nothing about my physical residence can be public."

For the performance, in a parking lot a few blocks from the gallery, Tolokonnikova wore a white balaclava inked with hearts, knee-high platform boots, fishnets, and a black-and-white minidress. Many in the crowd also wore balaclavas. It was hard to be sure who anyone was. There were Ukrainians and Russian dissidents and curators from major museums. "I just noticed Kesha walk by," Tolokonnikova's publicist alerted a disoriented bystander. The artist Shepard Fairey had made a print for the event; it was turned into an N.F.T., sales of which would benefit the fighters on the front line in Ukraine. He was there somewhere, supposedly, wearing black?

"Fuck Putin!" someone shouted. "Stomp him!" someone else offered. Tolokonnikova took the stage, surrounded by other members of Pussy Riot, jamming cacophonously and jumping up and down. "*Slava Ukraini*"—"Glory to Ukraine"—Tolokonnikova growled. Within weeks of the invasion, she had helped raise some seven million dollars for victims of the conflict.

"This is how we started Pussy Riot," she said. "Our idea was to play the shittiest music on the planet. No, seriously. We are a group of artists that didn't know how to make music. And we thought, If we are going to make political music, then other artists, like, actual musicians, are going to be, like, 'What the fuck, we're actually going to do so much better.' And it worked." She intoned lines from the Pussy Riot song known as "Punk Prayer": "Virgin Mary, Mother of God, chase Putin away!"



Nadya Tolokonnikova

In the years that Putin was consolidating power, Tolokonnikova sought to make herself maximally annoying. When Putin handpicked a successor, Dmitry Medvedev, to be President, she took part in public group sex with other activists. "We just decided to tell everyone, 'You guys are fucked.' And we fucked for it. We called the action 'Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear.'" (The word *medvedev* means "bearlike" in Russian.) She helped found Pussy Riot in 2011, when Putin, who had already been President for two terms and was on his second stint as Prime Minister, sought the

Presidency again. The group performed on the roof of a prison where Tolokonnikova's then husband and the opposition figure Alexei Navalny were both being held. In Red Square, they climbed onto a platform and sang a song about Putin wetting his pants.

Pussy Riot first performed "Punk Prayer" in early 2012, at the altar of Moscow's central cathedral. The goal was to illuminate the corruption of Russian Orthodox Church leaders and their support of Putin. ("The head of the K.G.B., their patron saint,/Leads protesters to holding cells under escort/So as not to offend His Holiness,/Women must bear children and love.") Tolokonnikova and two comrades were arrested and charged with "hooliganism, motivated by religious hatred." She was sentenced to two years in a penal colony, where she was forced to sew policemen's uniforms.

A few days after the L.A. performance, Tolokonnikova was at the gallery, unmasked. She is thirty-three and soft-spoken, with brown eyes and dark hair dyed gray at the roots. Around her neck hung a small wooden Orthodox cross. "I'm not religious," she said. "I just like crosses. I have them everywhere." On her middle finger, above a cutoff black lace glove, was a tattoo of another. "I'm just reclaiming back the symbol," she said. "I'm the Matriarch of the Orthodox Church." She chuckled. "It's an alternative to the Patriarch." According to Tolokonnikova, the cathedral in Moscow is now commonly called the Pussy Riot Church. Orthodox believers have called her a demon and a witch.

"We have one law started because of us already," Tolokonnikova said. "It's commonly known as the Pussy Riot law in Russia. They started it while we were in court. They decided to write a new article into the Russian criminal code which is about blasphemy and hurting religious feelings."

For the exhibition at Deitch, Pussy Riot had written a new song called "Putin's Ashes." An accompanying video was projected on the gallery's walls. In it, a cohort of Pussy Riot members, some of them Ukrainians, burn a portrait of Putin. Vials labelled "Putin's Ashes" were also on display. "I believe that these ashes will actually transform into actual Putin's ashes if we have enough intention," Tolokonnikova said. She recited a few words from the new song: "I'm sharpening my knife for Putin/We will not forgive your evil." She added, "Prayer is the oldest form of songwriting."

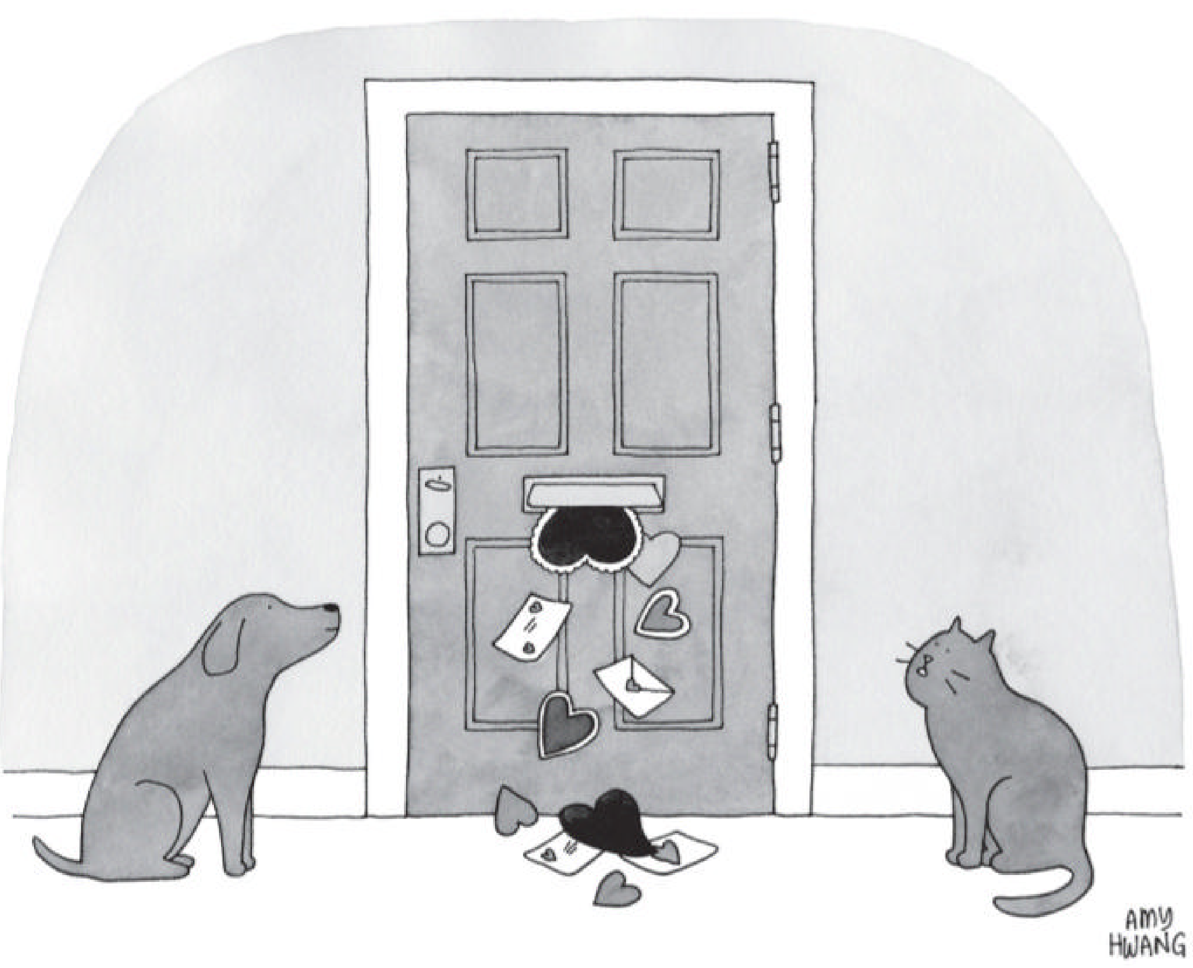
—*Dana Goodyear*

HANDS OFF DEPT.
PRICELESS, ENDLESS

In 2008, Patrick Bringley was twenty-five and grieving his older brother, Tom, who had died of cancer that June. Bringley had quit his event-planning job at a magazine (this one) and longed to "commune with things that felt fundamental," he said recently. After a visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where his mother wept in front of a Pietà, he was riding the subway in Brooklyn when a thought hit him: he should become a security guard at the Met. "I was attracted by this idea of doing something straightforward and honest and useful, like keeping people's hands off of some of the most beautiful things human hands have made," he said.

He answered an ad in the *Times* and went to an open house. "They tell you the hours"—for beginners, twelve hours on Fridays and Saturdays and eight hours on Sundays—"and half the people leave," he recalled. After a week of training ("Protect life and property, in that order," he was told), he joined the Met's largest department: some five hundred guards, who work in rotating "platoons." Bringley spent the next decade at the museum, and has now written a guard's-eye memoir, "All the Beauty in the World," detailing a job that is equal parts dreamy, dull, and pragmatic. "You can spend an hour deciding to learn about ancient Egypt, or look around at people and write a short story about one in your head," he explained.

Bringley was standing in the museum's lobby, wearing a Mets cap. On his way in, he'd set off the metal detector and greeted the guard who searched his bag like a college freshman returning to his high school. He circled around outside to a staff entrance, which led into a maze of gray hallways beneath the galleries. "Like a tree, as big as it is above, it's just as big below," he said. On the walls were signs reading "YIELD TO ART IN TRANSIT" and historical photos, including one of a Met guard leaning against a wall with his hands at his tailbone. "That's exactly the way we lean, a hundred years later," Bringley said. In the old days, there was an underground shooting range, where the night guards



"Is our owner hot?"

would face off against the day guards in annual competitions.

Bringley passed the changing rooms, which have an electric shoe buffer and an office that issues uniforms: dark-blue suit, black shoes, clip-on tie. When new guards join the union, they get an eighty-dollar hose allowance, to replace worn-out socks. The job has its hazards (foot aches, leg cramps), but also perks, including discount hot dogs from the venders on Fifth Avenue, celebrity sightings (Michael Stipe once asked Bringley for directions to "Madame X"), and "the freedom that comes with being able to think your thoughts," Bringley said.

He took an elevator up to the Old Master galleries, or, in guardspeak, Sector 10. It was Bringley's first home section, when he was in acute mourning and eager to dwell in the "profound quiet" of the Lamentations. When he was bored, he counted the painted figures in each room of the wing, tallying eight thousand four hundred and ninety-six at the time. Different zones have their pros and cons, including floor hardness (European Paintings has soft wood; Greek and Roman has unforgiving marble), noise level (Asian is usually quiet; Egyptian is overrun with kids), and proximity to the lockers (Modern and Contemporary is a seven-minute walk, which eats up your breaks).

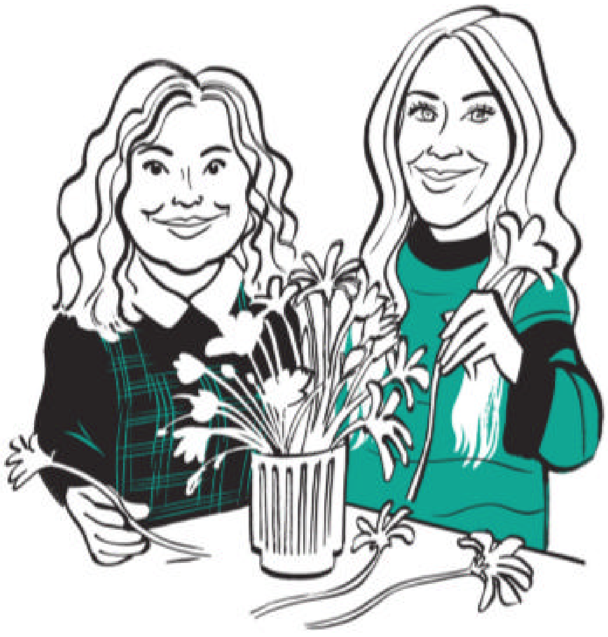
At the top of the Great Hall steps, Bringley fist-bumped a guard named Mike Carlino. "I trained Mike back in the day!" Bringley said. He pointed out a blue splotch on a nearby stone archway: a "guard mark," from a century of leaning. Bringley walked to the French period rooms (Sector 6), where a guy in a suit once refused to budge after Bringley gave the five-minute closing warning. When another guard finally shouted him out, the man told his young son, "Small people, small power. It's life." Bringley said that guards sometimes field odd questions, including "Is this real?" ("People ask for the 'Mona Lisa,' too, or they ask for the dinosaurs.") Heading south, to Sector 9, he found Picasso's "Woman in White," which he once saw a guy accidentally knock with a shoulder.

At van Gogh—wood floors, but busy—he greeted a guard named Tiffany Dunbar, who was on hour five of a twelve-hour shift. Dunbar said that the rash of climate activists throwing soup or mashed potatoes at paintings in Europe had led the Met guards to review their protocol: alert the Command Center and clear the galleries. She looked around; no soup-wielders in sight. "Say a person is a one-in-a-million personality. That means we're getting seven of those a year, at least," Bringley said. "One of the first things someone told me is, 'You get bored of the art, you watch the people. You get bored of the people, you watch the art.'"

—*Michael Schulman*

GESTURES
HOW I MET YOUR FLORIST

In 2020, Tasha Muresan, a former children's-book publicist, launched a floral-design studio, Bloom Bloom, out of a small apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. That November, she came across an Instagram post by the actress Hilary Duff (Muresan has been a fan since Duff's teen-age stardom on "Lizzie McGuire"), in which Duff lamented that she was isolating in her Brooklyn apartment after being exposed to COVID on a set. Muresan sent a private message to Duff's husband, the musician Matthew Koma, suggesting that he cheer Duff up with flowers. Koma responded minutes later, and soon Muresan had delivered a fanciful arrangement to Duff's door. "It was a real shoot-your-shot moment," Muresan said recently. Since then, Duff has used Bloom Bloom more or less constantly.



Tasha Muresan and Hilary Duff

Muresan and Duff, however, had never met in person—at least, not until two weeks ago. Duff was in New York and decided to sandwich a floral-design workshop in between talk-show interviews.

Duff, who is thirty-five, with sunflower-colored hair, has been on a mid-career hot streak. She had a seven-year run opposite Sutton Foster on the television show "Younger," and accounts for most of the charm of "How I Met Your Father," which is beginning its second season on Hulu. Recently, she's been floating the idea of a "Lizzie McGuire" reboot. Her current projects film in Los Angeles, but she wants to return to New York at some point. "I could be in a Broadway show," she said. "We want to spend the majority of our older life here."

She arrived for the workshop, in a private room of the Whitby Hotel, in midtown, wearing a beige Khaite sweater and chunky suède boots. Muresan was waiting with several vases full of blooms. "Tasha!" Duff said. She pulled Muresan, who had styled herself like Wednesday Addams, in a dark gingham dress and black stockings, into a bear hug.

"So my husband actually found you," Duff said. "But what happened, exactly?"

"He said something like, She's so sad and, like, pregnant and quarantining," Muresan said.

Talk turned to flowers. "Can I tell you my dream?" Duff said. "I really want to learn how to do, like, a bouquet with one lone sprig off to the side. I like it awkward and not balanced."

Muresan nodded and explained that a good floral arrangement often has three key ingredients. First, "we have our face flowers," she said. "Flowers that literally have a face. Then we have filler. Last, there is gesture—those are the elements that do the weird lone-tendril thing and bring in extra romance."

She showed Duff some heirloom, blackberry-hued fringed tulips and a pail of delicate pink sweet-pea blossoms. "You should smell them," Muresan said. "Some people say they smell like Froot Loops." She pointed to a jar full of twisty green stems. "And these smell like onions because, well, they are onions."

Duff said that the scent reminded her of her former home in L.A. "I was, like, Why does my house smell like onions *all the time*?" she said. "And the gardener was, like, Oh, you must have a scallion plant nearby, and he found it and dug it up. I had no idea one plant could be that funky."

At a workstation, Duff began shoving purple ranunculus into a vase. "I would love to own an interior-design slash flower slash wine slash coffee store," she said. One issue: she's bad with plants. "I'm a murderer of them all," she said. "I just killed a forty-year-old cactus."

Muresan encouraged Duff to plump up her anemic-looking arrangement: "Another rule is to work in triangles, so that you never have two flowers that look like eyeballs staring at you."

Next, Muresan passed around bright-coral poppies, along with a Bic lighter. "Poppies, even though they're beautiful and delicate, they're really aggressive," she said. "You literally have to light the end on fire and char the stem." Duff lit one as if it were a cigarette.

At the end of the lesson, Muresan handed out the onion stems, which formed cartoonish curlicues. It was time to add final pops of "gesture."

"Could it *have* a better name than 'gesture'?" Duff said, sticking an onion stalk sideways into the mix. She stepped back to appraise her work, which looked spiky and oddly windblown. She smiled proudly at her creation. "This guy is on his own little journey," she said.

—Rachel Syme

POSTSCRIPT
TOM VERLAINE

He awoke to the sound of water dripping into a rusted sink. The streets below were bathed in medieval moonlight, reverberating silence. He lay there grappling with the terror of beauty, as the night unfolded like a Chinese screen. He lay shuddering, riveted by flickering movements of aliens and angels as the words and melodies of "Marquee Moon" were formed, drop by drop, note by note, from a state of calm yet sinister excitement. He was Tom Verlaine, and that was his process: exquisite torment.

Born Thomas Joseph Miller, raised in Wilmington, Delaware, he left his parental home and shed his name, a discarded skin curled in the corner of a modest garage among stacks of used air-conditioners that required his father's constant professional attention. There were hockey sticks and a bicycle and piles of Tom's old newspapers strewn in the back, covered with ghostly outlines of distorted objects; he would run over tin cans until they were flattened, barely recognizable, and then spray them with gold, his two-dimensional sculptures, each representing a rapturous musical phrase. In high school, he played the saxophone, embracing John Coltrane and Albert Ayler. He played hockey, too, and when a flying puck knocked out his front teeth he was obliged to put away his saxophone and dedicate himself to the electric guitar.

He lived twenty-eight minutes from where I was raised. We could easily have sauntered into the same Wawa on the Wilmington-South Jersey border in search of Yoo-hoo or Tastykakes. We might have met, two black sheep, on some rural stretch, each carrying books of the poetry of French Symbolists—but we didn't. Not until 1973, on East Tenth Street, across from St. Mark's Church, where he stopped me and said, "You're Smith." He had long hair, and we clocked each other, both echoing the future, both wearing clothes they didn't wear anymore. I noticed the way his long arms hung, and his equally long and beautiful hands, and then we went our separate ways. That was, until Easter night, April 14, 1974. Lenny Kaye and I took a rare taxi ride from the Ziegfeld Theatre after seeing the première of "Ladies and Gentlemen: The Rolling Stones," straight down to the Bowery to see a new band called Television.

The club was CBGB. There were only a handful of people present, but Lenny and I were immediately taken with it, with its pool table and narrow bar and low stage. What we saw that night was kin, our future, a perfect merging of poetry and rock and roll. As I watched Tom play, I thought, Had I been a boy, I would've been him.

I went to see Television whenever they played, mostly to see Tom, with his pale-blue eyes and swanlike neck. He bowed his head, gripping his Jazzmaster, releasing billowing clouds, strange alleyways populated with tiny men, a murder of crows, and the cries of bluebirds rushing through a replica of space. All transmuted through his long fingers, all but strangling the neck of his guitar.

Through the coming weeks, we drew closer. As we walked the city streets, we would improvise ongoing tales, our own "Arabian Nights." We discovered that we both loved the work of the Armenian American composer Alan Hovhaness, our favorite work being "Prayer of St. Gregory." Examining each other's bookcases, we were amazed to find that our books were nearly identical, even those by authors difficult to find. Cossery, Hedayat, Tutuola, Mrabet. We were both independent literary scouts, and we came to share our secret sources.

He devoured poetry and dark-chocolate-covered Entenmann's doughnuts, downed with coffee and cigarettes. Sometimes he would seem dreamy and faraway then suddenly break into peals of laughter. He was angelic yet slightly demonic, a cartoon character with the grace of a dervish. I knew him then. We liked holding hands and spending hours browsing the shelves of Flying Saucer News and going to Forty-eighth Street and looking at guitars that he could never afford and riding the Staten Island Ferry after three sets at CBGB and climbing six flights of stairs to the apartment on East Eleventh Street and lying together on a mattress gazing at the ceiling and listening to the rain and hearing something else.

There was no one like Tom. He possessed the child's gift of transforming a drop of water into a poem that somehow begat music. In his last days, he had the selfless support of devoted friends. Having no children, he welcomed the love he received from my daughter, Jesse, and my son, Jackson.

In his final hours, watching him sleep, I travelled backward in time. We were in the apartment, and he cut my hair, and some pieces stuck out this way and that, so he called me Winghead. In the years to follow, simply Wing. Even when we got older, always Wing. And he, the boy who never grew up, aloft the Omega, a golden filament in the vibrant violet light.

—Patti Smith

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

THE MERRY WIDOW

The ninety-year-old aristocrat known for her cheeky accounts of the British élite.

BY REBECCA MEAD

Lady Glenconner knows that high social standing is no obstacle to high mischief.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAM GREGG

Holkham Hall, an austere eighteenth-century sandstone mansion that is among the most spectacularly situated of England's stately homes, was built just south of the dune-edged beaches of Norfolk, in a park that extends for three thousand acres and encompasses woodland, rolling greensward, and an ornamental lake. Commissioned by a wealthy landowner named Thomas Coke, the house was designed according to strict Palladian principles, and consists of four symmetrical wings arranged around a central core, which contains a long gallery. In this space, Coke—who was ennobled as the Earl of Leicester in 1744, and whose name, like that of his descendants, is pronounced "cook"—displayed acquisitions from his Grand Tour, including a statue of Diana that had reputedly once belonged to Cicero.

In the early twentieth century, the long gallery was equipped with a more modern object: a gramophone. The fourth Earl used to play classical-music recordings on it. His eldest granddaughter, Anne, who was born in 1932, loved listening with him. An intergenerational favorite was the aria "I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls," from the 1843 Irish opera "The Bohemian Girl," in which the soprano imagines having "riches too great to count," and boasting "of a high ancestral name." It was a joke between grandfather and granddaughter, given that they actually possessed a high ancestral name. (The illustriousness of the Coke family dates to the sixteenth century, when Sir Edward Coke, a celebrated jurist and legal scholar, served as attorney general to Queen Elizabeth I.) The Cokes even had a marble hall of sorts: Holkham's front door leads to a grand interior modelled on Roman temples, with a domed, coffered ceiling supported by pink-veined columns and a stone staircase ascending to a gilded reception room known as the Saloon. The house held other treasures, including a Leonardo da Vinci manuscript, the Codex Leicester, which had been purchased in 1717. At the age of ten, Anne was given the fortnightly chore of airing the Codex: retrieving it from the butler's pantry, where it was kept under lock and key alongside various jewels, and turning through its seventy-two hand-drawn pages with a licked fingertip.

Holkham Hall was a family home, if on a scale beyond the imagining of most families. In 1950, not long before Anne's eighteenth birthday, her coming-out ball was held at the estate, with the woodlands festively lit by searchlights left over from the Second World War. Among those in attendance were King George VI and his wife, Elizabeth—good friends of Anne's parents, who served the Royal Family in the antiquated roles of extra equerry and lady of the bedchamber. The staff at Holkham Hall offered guests venison that had been shot on the grounds, and champagne that had been laid down at Anne's birth. (Perhaps too much champagne: the next morning, the body of a young gardener was found floating in a fountain. Anne was not told of the fatality until years later.)

Although Anne had grown up in splendor, none of it—not the house, the land, the jewels, the antiquities—was hers to inherit. According to English laws of primogeniture, an earldom can pass only to a son or other male descendant. Some of Anne's relatives saw her gender as a problem from the start. "There's a photograph of me right on that staircase," she told me when I met her at Holkham Hall, one morning in early December. "I'm in my father's arms, and Grandpa's there, and Great-Grandpa's there, looking *terribly* disappointed in me."

The disappointment continued when Anne was followed by two sisters and no brothers, a situation that meant the entire property was destined for a distant cousin who lived in South Africa. Holkham Hall is now the family home of the eighth Earl of Leicester, the grandson of that South African cousin, who made the hall available for my conversation with Lady Anne, as she was titled after the death of her grandfather. The state rooms were lavishly decorated for the holidays, a project of the current Lady Leicester, whose displays are open to the public for a small fee. The long gallery—which, during Lady Anne's childhood, housed a Christmas tree overseen by two butlers, who insured that the candles on it did not set the house aflame—had fake snow on the floorboards and thickets of rime-encrusted birches obscuring Cicero's Diana in her niche. The marble hall featured fifty-odd Christmas trees, like the entrance of a fancy department store.

We sat on satin-upholstered, gilt-legged armchairs in the Saloon, beneath a fleshy Baroque painting of Andromeda being rescued by Perseus. Lady Anne explained that, during her childhood, this art work had been banished, on moral grounds, to the attic, where she and her next-oldest sibling, Carey, had positioned it and a similarly louche "Rape of Lucretia," by Procaccini, to form the walls of a little hideaway. Lady Anne has retained her finishing-school posture, as well as masses of thick golden hair. She wore an elegant skirt-and-jacket outfit in deep burgundy, though she kept on her coat, since the Saloon was chilly—yet not nearly as cold as she remembered it from her youth, when ice formed on the insides of the windows, refracting the views of the park. "I always knew I wouldn't inherit," she told me. "But my father, rather charmingly, treated me as a boy—I used to work in the estate office, and go around the estate with him, and visit all the villages." In 1956, she got married, at Holkham, to Colin Tennant, the heir to the Barony of Glenconner. She recalled, "There were three wedding cakes and two huge tents—one for the workers and one for the tenant farmers—while my father's friends were inside here. I remember going down and cutting the cake in each of the tents. It was a wedding as if I were a boy." She went on, "I just felt sorry for my father, because he would have *so* loved to have a son. I did my best, but it wasn't enough."

In 2019, Lady Anne—Anne Glenconner, as she is known today—published a memoir, "Lady in Waiting," that detailed not only her childhood at Holkham Hall but also her decades as a friend and companion to Princess Margaret, the younger sister of Queen Elizabeth II. "Lady in Waiting," which became a surprise best-seller in the U.K. and has been translated into eleven languages, describes the peculiar privileges and rituals of England's landed aristocracy from the perspective of a wry insider. It gives an unusually candid depiction of life in the upper echelon of British society at a time when the centuries-old peerage has been partly superseded by newer aristocracies—those of global celebrity and freshly generated wealth.

Both "Lady in Waiting," and a follow-up volume, "Whatever Next?," which is being published in the U.S. this month, are funnier and sadder than might be expected. While never losing sight of the advantages of being born into an élite family, Glenconner offers a poignant perspective on the constraining limits on aristocratic women of her generation, whose formal educations were minimal and whose life expectations revolved around marrying well, managing a large household, and providing a male heir. (The last of these expectations endures, though the system of primogeniture has recently been modified for the Royal Family, so that elder daughters can succeed to the throne ahead of their younger brothers.) "Lady in Waiting," which Glenconner completed by dictating her memories to a voice recorder and compiling them into book form with the help of a ghostwriter, Hannah Bourne-Taylor, deftly captures a postwar era that presents no contradiction between maintaining the expense of numerous servants and parsimoniously conserving string and brown paper. Lady Glenconner, who was born only six years after Queen Elizabeth, shares the late monarch's generational and class-based manners and mores, which demanded the performance of reserve and restraint under the most trying of circumstances. She also shares the Queen's antiquated enunciation; "Lady in Waiting" is best enjoyed in audio form, read by the author, with *orff* for "off."

Among Glenconner's other accomplishments, she was one of six peers' daughters who served as maids of honor at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, in 1953. "We were rather like the Spice Girls," she told me. Too excited to eat breakfast, she almost fainted during the Queen's anointing, and had to be propped up by Black Rod, a parliamentary official; as the event drew to a close, she gratefully accepted a swig of brandy from the Archbishop of Canterbury's flask. In addition to offering a personal perspective on some of the nation's most public moments, "Lady in Waiting" provides an intimate view of the monarchy's strange aura and its effect on those in propinquity to it. A reader learns, for example, that Princess Margaret once made the gift of a toilet brush to one of her ladies-in-waiting: the recipient had discreetly hidden her toilet brush when the Princess came to stay, as if royals were too lofty for excretion.

Because the Queen chose not to record her more intimate thoughts and experiences for public dissemination, Lady Glenconner serves as a kind of proxy for Elizabeth, who was described by people close to her as wise, witty, and occasionally irreverent. In "Lady in Waiting," Glenconner often underscores her awareness that high social standing is no obstacle to high mischief. In one chapter, she writes of anticipating a German invasion of England as a child; fearing that Holkham Hall would be occupied by Nazi leaders, and then visited by Hitler himself, she filled jam jars with a foul concoction of food scraps, medicines, muddy water, and carpet fluff, in the hope of poisoning the Führer with it. She and her

"There's something so cozy about snuggling up indoors while outside the world spins into chaos."

• •

sister Carey practiced the scheme on a Teddy bear, sidling up to it and offering it a drink. Glenconner writes, "We had decided to make Hitler fall in love with us, which, when I think about it now, was rather like the Mitfords. But, then, we were going to kill him—which, I suppose, was rather unlike the Mitfords."

Even if Lady Glenconner has shown the occasional rebellious streak, she remains largely a defender of the social hierarchy in which she is enmeshed. "The aristocracy are founded on people that have *done* something," Glenconner told me at Holkham Hall, citing the achievements of her Coke ancestors in law and in agriculture. "They *created* something—the estate, which is there, which is passed on. Some of the aristocracy fade—nothing happens, they can't think of anything, they spend, and their houses go, and that's it. But certain families, like this one, are able to keep on going, to keep on inventing, to keep on thinking of different things."

In its exploration of a rarefied social stratum, "Lady in Waiting" provides a vivid case study of aristocratic degeneracy, in the person of Glenconner's late husband, Colin Tennant. (She had earlier been engaged to Johnnie Althorp, the heir to the Earldom of Spencer, but the relationship ended after he was informed that Anne had "mad blood," through her distant familial relationship to two cousins of Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret who had been committed to an asylum. Althorp went on to marry Frances Roche; their youngest daughter was Lady Diana Spencer, the future Princess of Wales.) Tennant, whose family had a giant property of its own, the Glen estate, in Scotland, was tall, handsome, and charming, though deficits of empathy were evident from the start of their marriage. In one of the book's most memorable episodes, Glenconner recounts her honeymoon in Paris, where Tennant—having slept through their first night together and promising her a surprise for the second—took her to a brothel. The bride, a virgin, was ushered into a velvet-upholstered wing chair and sat next to her new husband as a man and a woman energetically copulated on a bed in front of them. "The intertwined pasty bodies of the French couple squelching into each other on the bed was the most unattractive thing you could possibly imagine," she writes. "Every now and then they asked us if we would like to join in. So, I found myself saying politely, 'That's very kind of you, but no thank you.'" These days, men sometimes approach her at public events and whisper "Squelch, squelch!" in her ear. She pretends to be deaf.

Compared with the Coke family, the Tennants were nouveaux riches: the family fortune had been made in the nineteenth century, in bleach. But the Tennants had more cash on hand. In common with many British aristocratic families in the twentieth century, the Cokes became obliged to raise money by deaccessioning art works and other valuables. In 1980, the Codex Leicester was sold at auction for $5.3 million, to Armand Hammer; fourteen years later, it went for six times that amount to Bill Gates, in whose collection it remains—"Covered with my DNA," Glenconner notes. Tennant, meanwhile, expended vast amounts of his fortune on developing the tiny Caribbean island of Mustique as a party resort for the rich, famous, and titled, having paid forty-five thousand pounds for it in 1958. (After the success of "Lady in Waiting," Glenconner published a murder-mystery novel, "Murder on Mustique," which includes a dissolute rock star who bears a resemblance to Mick Jagger, a regular visitor to the island.)

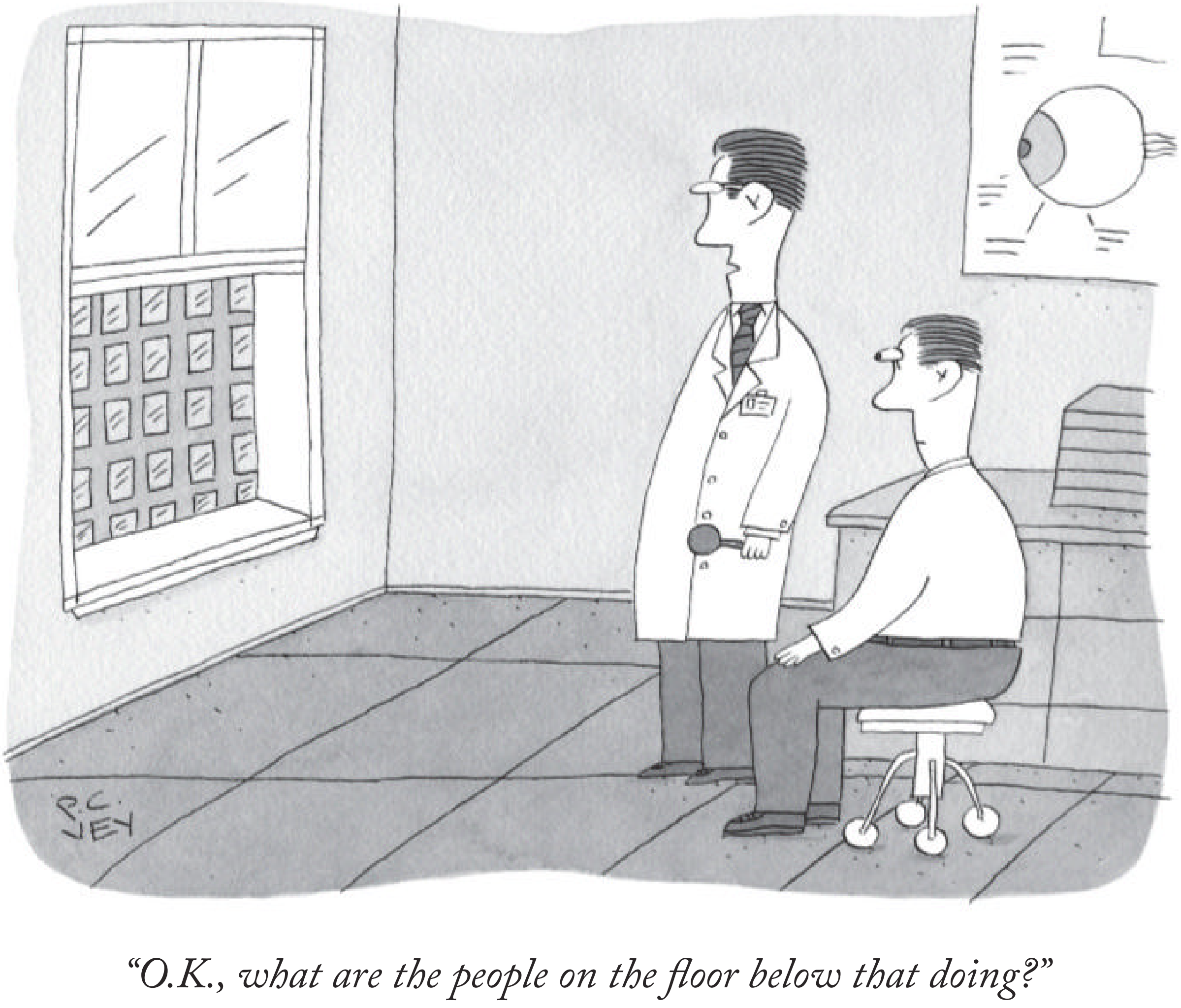
Tennant's habits and manners often came off as a parody of aristocratic eccentricity and careless decadence. Lady Glenconner writes that he went through a phase of wearing paper underpants, shocking guests at parties by declaring, "I'll eat my knickers," and then sticking his hands down his trousers, ripping the underpants off, and stuffing them into his mouth. In the nineteen-sixties, Tennant acquired a house on Tite Street, in the Chelsea neighborhood of London, that had once been the home of the artist James Whistler. When architects told Tennant that the interior was beyond renovation, he and Glenconner held a demolition party, providing safety glasses to guests, who shattered windows, splintered doors, and spray-painted obscenities on the walls. "Everyone behaved like complete hooligans," she remembers. Tennant had strong views about interior decoration, and planned his homes as if they were stage sets, resisting concessions to practicality. "Kitchens are frightfully common, Anne," he would say.

Amid this tumult, Glenconner had five children with Tennant. The first was a boy, Charlie. She writes, "Of course, since he was a boy, I was praised for having managed to produce an heir for Colin immediately. The relief was tangible." Two more sons, Henry and Christopher, followed, and then twins, May and Amy.

Glenconner found out only after she was married that Tennant had suffered two nervous breakdowns. "Once, he had run barefooted through London in his pajamas to hospital, claiming that his heart had stopped," she writes. ("The doctors must have wondered how he had got there if that had been the case," she observes.) Tennant's biographer, Nicholas Courtney, writes that he had a "very unattractive and uncontrollable temper." Tennant's financial dealings were equally impulsive. "He couldn't *bear* to be static," Glenconner told me. "He always wanted to be rushing around changing things, buying things. We had thirty Lucian Freuds at one point, and he sold them all. I once said to him, in a rather pathetic way, 'You don't seem to mind making these collections and then selling them. I *like* the things I have collected.' And he said, 'Oh, no! Once I've had them, and the opportunity to look at them, I want to be on to something else.'" Tennant "hated going to museums," Glenconner added. "Do you know why? Nothing's for sale."

Tennant, who became Lord Glenconner after his father's death, in 1983, died in 2010, leaving his widow a final surprise: he had bequeathed his entire personal fortune to his longtime valet and factotum, a St. Lucian man named Kent Adonai, whom he had originally hired, decades earlier, to help tend an elephant acquired from the Dublin Zoo. (The outward nature of the men's relationship is on awkward display in "The Man Who Bought Mustique," a documentary from 2000, with a domineering Tennant screeching commands at Adonai.) Lady Glenconner was not left destitute: after getting married, on the advice of her father, she had acquired a farmhouse on the Holkham estate, where she still lives. But she was reduced to buying back some personal items at auction, under the scrutiny of the tabloid press. "I said to the children, 'We're going to smile, we're going to enjoy this, and we're going to get what we can,'" she told me. "Afterwards, a man from the *Daily Mail* came up and said, 'I don't understand you, Lady Glenconner—we came to see you cry.' And I said, 'I *thought* you did.' And we laughed." She went on, "That's the way I had been brought up. Colin dealt us this horrible thing, and I wasn't going to let it destroy us." Eventually, in 2018, Adonai arrived at a financial settlement with the current Lord Glenconner, a grandson of Tennant's. One of the motivations for writing "Lady in Waiting," Glenconner told me, was that she needed the money.

In "Whatever Next?," Glenconner revisits her marriage, painting a fuller, and far less breezy, portrait of her late husband. "He was often a wonderful companion, a beloved father," she writes. "He was also an incredibly selfish, damaged, and occasionally dangerous man. . . . I lived with domestic violence and abuse for most of my marriage." From the start, her husband screamed at her, spit at her, shoved her, and threw things at her. He had numerous affairs with women, and once spiked her drink with what she suspects was LSD, in an attempt to loosen her up in the bedroom. "How strange and typical of Colin that, rather than being tender, he decided he could just drug me into doing what he liked," she writes. One day in the late seventies, in Mustique, he lost his temper and beat her savagely with a shark-vertebrae walking stick. "I was utterly terrified, convinced he might actually kill me," she says. The attack was never repeated, but thereafter she and Tennant lived ever more separate lives, though they remained married, fifty-four years in total. For thirty-four of them, Glenconner herself had a married lover, whose wife knew of their



"O.K., what are the people on the floor below that doing?"

arrangement and had a lover of her own. (Glenconner does not name her lover in her books, and has said that she never will.) "There was no question of any of us leaving our marriages," she writes. "It simply wasn't done."

The decision to write a tell-more memoir, she explained, was driven by the realization that she had made too little of Tennant's marital bullying in "Lady in Waiting," and by a sense that she had an obligation to other women who might be vulnerable. "Domestic abuse goes through all classes," she told me at Holkham Hall. "And the sort of people like me are so ashamed, really, you don't talk about it." She remains perversely proud of having stuck out her marriage, while also being convinced that nobody should put up with what she endured. The irony of having forgone divorce—and a settlement that might have amounted to half of Tennant's wealth—is not lost on her. "Perhaps he knew he was going to do that with his will, and he was just nice enough to me to keep me going," she said.

Glenconner does not absolve herself from criticism: in "Lady in Waiting," for example, she acknowledges her failings as a parent. Her two eldest boys, she notes, were handed off to a nanny, as was typical for aristocratic progeny at the time. When such nannies took their infant charges to the park, Glenconner writes, they would sit on specific benches, to indicate the rank of the families for which they worked: those employed by earls did not dare sit alongside those employed by dukes. During this period, her household staff also included a nursery maid, a housekeeper, a butler, and two cleaners. Among Glenconner's cohort, the responsibility of a wife was to take care of her husband before her children. "Children had their routine and adults had theirs," she writes. "Being a wife seemed more urgent than being a mother."

Glenconner was familiar with absentee parenting from her own childhood. At the outset of the Second World War, her father was sent with the Scots Guards to Egypt, accompanied by her mother, and she didn't see them for three years. During that time, Anne was at the mercy of a sadistic governess, Miss Bonner, who tied her hands to the bedposts at night. (In Glenconner's second murder-mystery novel, "A Haunting at Holkham," published in 2021, she took her revenge on Miss Bonner by having a fictional stand-in killed and buried beneath the sands of Holkham Beach.)

Charlie Tennant, Glenconner's eldest son, was plagued from childhood by extreme compulsions: he had to open and close a door repeatedly before going through it. In his early teens, he started using drugs, and he soon became addicted to heroin. He stole from his parents to fund his habit and cycled in and out of rehab clinics. In 1977, when Charlie was nineteen, Colin Tennant took the drastic step of disinheriting him from the Glen estate, the ancestral seat in Scotland, in favor of Charlie's younger brother Henry, fearing that Charlie would ruin it if it came into his hands.

Henry was less tortured than Charlie, but the apparent stability of his life—he married in 1983, at twenty-two, and soon fathered a son and heir—gave way in 1985, when he separated from his wife and came out as gay. "He went wild, presumably feeling finally liberated," Glenconner writes. It was the early years of the AIDS crisis, with no reliable treatment yet available. Late in 1986, moments before the Glenconners hosted one of their celebrated balls on Mustique, Colin told Anne that Henry was H.I.V.-positive. "To be handed my son's death sentence while standing in a glittering dress welcoming lots of guests felt like some sort of obscure nightmare," Glenconner writes.

Henry, one of the first British aristocrats to speak openly about AIDS, died in 1990, at the age of twenty-nine. Charlie got sober after six years of heroin addiction, married, and had a son, but in 1996, at the age of thirty-nine, he succumbed to hepatitis C.

As if the fates of her two eldest sons were not terrible enough, the youngest, Christopher, suffered a serious motorbike accident in 1987, and fell into a coma. A doctor told Glenconner that there was no hope of recovery and urged her to get on with her life. Appalled, she undertook a rigorous program of stimulating Christopher's senses: brushing his skin and exposing him to scents for fifteen minutes every hour. A roster of friends helped, including Christopher's former nanny, Barbara Barnes, who had just stopped taking care of Princes William and Harry. In "Lady in Waiting," Glenconner writes of Christopher, "My whole life became bound up in trying to save his." After four months, she arrived at the hospital to find Christopher in tears—the first sign of responsiveness he had shown since the accident. Cradling him, she said that if he got better she would buy him a car, asking him what kind he would like. The response: "Lamborghini."

Christopher regained many of his former capacities, but he walks with a limp and has other physical challenges. He lives with his wife, Johanna, in a house on the Holkham estate. His sisters also live in the area. Before Glenconner wrote further about her marriage in "Whatever Next?," she asked her children's permission, and all of them shared memories of their father. She found the process cathartic. Christopher told me, "I have nothing but respect and love for my dad, because he was amazing, amazing, amazing, amazing. But I can understand exactly how he might not seem that way to our mum."

"The Man Who Bought Mustique" captures a touching moment at an event, held by the Mustique Indigenous People Association, celebrating Tennant for his contributions to the island. When he addresses the group, his imperiousness briefly falters. "I would like also for you to remember Charlie Tennant and Henry Tennant, who loved you all deeply," he says, his voice quavering. Henry's son, Euan, who is thirty-nine, inherited the Glen estate; Charlie's twenty-nine-year-old son, Cody, is the fourth Baron Glenconner.

The trials of both Charlie and Henry were widely chronicled in the press, which published stories attributing their untimely deaths to a "Tennant Curse." On the day that Charlie was buried, the church and the graveyard were beset by reporters. "I suppose by then we had got used to them behaving so badly, but I still can't think of anything much lower than gatecrashing a funeral," Glenconner writes. Her sons' deaths, she told me, put all other losses in perspective: "In a way, if you go through that, nothing is ever quite as bad, unless you lose another child. That was really awful. I knew two of them were dying, and Christopher with his accident—it was five years before he was able to live on his own. If you go through something like that, and come out the other end, you are either broken or you come out stronger. I came out stronger."

"I'm running late for totally dignified reasons."

In late November, Glenconner was invited by the Queen Consort, Camilla, to a reception at Buckingham Palace, as part of an annual United Nations campaign against gender-based violence. With the publication of "Whatever Next?," Glenconner steps into a more prominent role as an advocate for battered women, but her activism is not without precedent. In the nineteen-seventies, she became a fund-raiser for Refuge, a British charity whose founder, Erin Pizzey, established the first domestic-violence shelter in the U.K., in West London. "It never occurred to me that this interest might be founded on my own experiences with Colin," Glenconner writes in the new book. "Erin Pizzey perhaps saw something in me that told her I should get involved."

Few guests at the U.N. event can have been as familiar with the Palace as Glenconner. Her memories of being there include the day of the Queen's coronation: after the ceremony, the new monarch was so excited that she ran through a corridor with her Spice Girl attendants; they eventually plumped down on a red sofa, their dresses billowing around them, and kicked their legs up in joy. At the recent reception, Glenconner met Mel B, one of the actual Spice Girls. "We got on *frightfully* well," Glenconner told me. But the occasion made unwelcome headlines the following day when another guest, Ngozi Fulani, who runs a charity organization called Sistah Space, revealed on social media that she had been repeatedly questioned about where she was "really" from by Lady Susan Hussey—a daughter of the twelfth Earl Waldegrave, and a former lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth II. Apparently not satisfied by Fulani's answer—that she was from Hackney, in East London—Lady Susan had moved aside Fulani's hair to read her nametag. Within hours, Lady Susan had apologized and had resigned from her honorary role as one of King Charles's ladies of the household.

Lady Susan had clearly overstepped, Glenconner said to me a few days later. "She did what you must *never* do," she observed, with a shudder. Still, she had some sympathy for her. "It was a United Nations event, so people *had* come from abroad," Glenconner noted. "There were three queens—the Queen of Jordan, the Queen of Belgium, you know?"

The role of a lady-in-waiting, as detailed in Glenconner's first book, lies somewhere between that of a friend or a confidante and that of a personal assistant—identifying the location of the bathroom on a royal visit, or insuring that a royal visitor is served the right thing to drink. (In Princess Margaret's case, a gin-and-tonic at lunch and whiskey with water in the evening.) Ladies-in-waiting are not recompensed, other than by proximity to royalty. Glenconner received only a modest dress allowance for her attentions to Princess Margaret. Even after decades of close friendship, Glenconner addressed the Princess as "Ma'am," while being addressed herself as Anne. "I would have been very uncomfortable calling her anything else," she writes.

"Lady in Waiting" paints a fond, if not always flattering, portrait of Princess Margaret, whom Glenconner had known from early childhood. Holkham Hall is a short drive from Sandringham, one of the Royal Family's country residences. Glenconner writes that the Princess was "naughty, fun and imaginative—the very best sort of friend to have." They used to dig holes in the sand on Holkham Beach, in the hope that people would fall into them. Princess Margaret, Glenconner believes, was never allowed to shed her role as the wayward royal sister. "The fact she enjoyed the company of creative people, a cigarette and a drink made it easy to cast her as a rebel," she writes.

Princess Margaret was able to indulge in those tastes in sybaritic Mustique, where in the late sixties Colin Tennant gave her a piece of land as a gift. When Tennant took her to the site, she surreptitiously pulled up the wooden stakes demarcating it, extending the perimeter. She then told Tennant, firmly, "I think I ought to have a bit more land." Mustique became for Princess Margaret a much valued escape from the pressures of palace life, while she became for Tennant the most valuable of marketing assets.

At other times, Glenconner provided Princess Margaret with a taste of more mundane activities: on visits to Glenconner's Norfolk home, the Princess sometimes dismantled the chandelier and cleaned it in the bathtub. Another bond between them was their shared experience of marital unhappiness. In 1960, Princess Margaret married Antony Armstrong-Jones, a society photographer who was ennobled as the Earl of Snowdon after their wedding. "Like Colin, Tony was unpredictable," Glenconner writes. "He was eccentric and extremely demanding, often rubbing people up the wrong way. But, just like Colin, he could be incredibly charming." Snowdon had his own tactics for belittling his wife: "Lady in Waiting" tells how he used to leave insulting notes in Princess Margaret's chest of drawers. (One read, "You look like a Jewish manicurist and I hate you.") Princess Margaret rarely unburdened herself about Snowdon's behavior, and encouraged her lady-in-waiting to exercise similar restraint. Glenconner writes, "Once when I didn't open a door quickly enough for Colin, and he blew up and she saw me start to cry, she just said, 'Stop that at once, Anne. It's absolutely no use.' . . . I learned a lot about stiffening one's spine and getting on with it from Princess Margaret." Glenconner is impatient with what she sees as the excessive sensitivity of younger generations, including royals. Twice at recent public events, when she was asked for her opinion of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's decision to move to California, she shot back, "The farther away the better, as far as I am concerned."

In 1973, at a gathering at Glen House, Princess Margaret, then forty-two, met a garden designer seventeen years her junior, named Roddy Llewellyn. They went on to have an eight-year-long relationship, which contributed to her divorce, in 1978. At the time, it was a major scandal; as Glenconner writes, Princess Margaret was "the first high-profile member of the Royal Family since King Henry VIII" to end a marriage. The house-party is dramatized in "The Crown," with Helena Bonham Carter, as the Princess, lounging by the side of a pool with Nancy Carroll, as Lady Anne, pointing out possible beaux. Glenconner says that, in fact, she merely invited Llewellyn to make up the numbers at the party. In "Whatever Next?," she writes of the show, "They made it look as if I was pimping for her," remarking, "That would be taking being a good hostess a bit too far in my opinion." Although she enjoyed the initial episodes of "The Crown," with their representation of the coronation and the young Queen's adjustment to the demands of her role, she found the distortions of later seasons—such as the suggestion that the Duke of Edinburgh bore some responsibility for his sister's death in a plane crash—unnecessary and hurtful. "It's fantasy," Lady Glenconner tells the capacity crowds who show up to see her at literary festivals, and before whom she clearly revels in finally being the center of attention. "*I'm* the real thing."

When "Lady in Waiting" was first published, Glenconner did not dare send a copy to the Queen, who, even as a child, had disapproved of the way Anne and Princess Margaret rode tricycles around the grand rooms of Holkham Hall, or jumped out from hiding places to surprise footmen carrying silver trays from the kitchen. After the memoir was out, however, Glenconner bumped into Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York, who assured her that "the boss"—as Fergie characterized the monarch—had loved the book. Glenconner then sent the Queen a signed copy.

It saddens Glenconner to drive past Windsor Castle these days, now that the Queen is gone, but she is good friends with King Charles, whom she has known since he was a boy. He was "like a younger brother to me," she writes. One of her early memories of Charles is as a four-year-old: on the day of Elizabeth II's coronation, Glenconner saw him pick up his mother's crown. "He has got all these very, very good ideas," she told me, speaking of Charles's long-standing commitment to environmentalism and to the regeneration of local economies. "He's got great passion."

When the King is at Sandringham, he sometimes invites Glenconner over for dinner, sending a car to pick her up. She'd been at Sandringham not long before we met at Holkham Hall, and there had been talk of Lady Susan Hussey's resignation. Lady Susan's daughter, Lady Katherine Brooke, was recently appointed by Camilla as one of six Queen's companions, a newly created designation for a modernizing monarchy: there will be no more ladies-in-waiting.

There had also been discussion of King Charles's coronation, which will take place in May, on a scale much reduced from that of Queen Elizabeth. There will reportedly be only two thousand guests, as opposed to the eight thousand who were at Westminster Abbey seventy years ago. Competition for seats at the Abbey is inevitable, with not every titled grandee guaranteed a spot. Glenconner said, "I think the dukes will all come, because they are part of the ceremony—they give their liege, or whatever it is. But I think the other peers and peeresses will have to ballot."

As the mere eldest daughter of an earl, Glenconner is unlikely to make the cut if rank is the sole factor. But as a family friend—and especially as a rare living link to the coronation of 1953—she hopes to be invited. She is not taking any chances at being overlooked. "They have to be *reminded*," she told me. "Which I did." Finding herself next to King Charles, she had made full use of the opportunity. "I am going to be a bit cheeky now," she informed His Majesty, putting in her request right then. Why ever not? There was nothing to be gained by waiting. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

NICOLE KIDMAN COMES TO MORE PLACES

BY BRUCE HANDY

The Oscar-winning actor and pandemic-era AMC spokesperson is pressed into further service.

"WE COME TO THIS PLACE for magic. (*Walks through front door, smiles with knowing anticipation*) And for envelopes. For the magic of envelopes. We come to Staples to laugh, to cry, to care. Because we have an abiding passion for office supplies. All of us. (*Conspiratorial nod*) That indescribable feeling we get when we walk down the "Filing" aisle and run our fingers along a twenty-four-pack of three-tab manila folders, and we go somewhere we've never been before. (*Look of blissful transport*) Not just happily accepting the fact that, without a real office to go to anymore, we now have to pay for things like pens, but somehow fuelled with an irresistible desire to own ten of every width of Sharpie. (*Gazes gobsmacked at various displays*) Post-its plentiful enough to cover a medium-sized city. Pencil sharpeners, pencil holders . . . *pencils*. Somehow, O.C.D. feels good in a place like this. Our Pendaflex accordion folders feel like the best part of us, and ninety-nine-dollar printers feel perfect and powerful—and not doomed to break in six months—because here (*looks directly at camera*) . . . they are." (*Hypnotizes viewers into downloading the Staples Rewards app*)

"WE COME TO THIS PLACE for wings. (*Walks through front door, smiles with knowing anticipation*) We come to Buffalo Wild Wings to laugh, to cry, to eat wings, wings, and more wings. Because we need that. All of us. (*Winks at tables of guys going, "Oscar-winning actor Nicole Kidman?! What are you doing at a Buffalo Wild Wings in Lansing?"*) That indescribable feeling we get when the waitress drops a party-size platter of wings in front of us, with sides of Original Buffalo sauce *and* Hellzapoppin' Habanero, and we go somewhere we've never been before. Not just full, but stuffed. With wings. Together. In public. Sticky tomato-based sauces on our fingers and around our mouths. (*Dabs at corner of mouth with napkin, delicately but purposefully*) A meaningless Thursday-night game between the Lions and the Jets on thirty screens. (*Eyes shimmer with bittersweet recognition of the fleeting nature of such pleasures*) Somehow, heartburn feels good in a place like this. (*Flirty, kittenish burp*) Wings feel like the best part of a chicken, and Buffalo Wild Wings wings feel like the most delicious food ever invented, and not just one step up from offal, because here (*looks directly at camera*) . . . they are." (*Hypnotizes viewers into ordering another pitcher of Bud Light*)

"WE COME TO THIS PLACE for pyrotechnics. And/or sex toys. (*Walks through front door, smiles with knowing anticipation*) We come to Rocket Rick's—the largest fireworks emporium and adult superstore on I-80 in Pennsylvania—to laugh, to cry, to find the best deals on cherry bombs and French ticklers in the greater Punxsutawney metropolitan area. Because we need that. All of us. (*Gracefully sidesteps DVD display featuring "Doing the Ricardos"*) Well, not me, per se. I'm using 'we' in the sense that waiters do when they say, 'Are we ready to order?' or 'Are we still working?' Meaning you. You come to whichever places you like. I come to . . . well, I'm actually in a studio in Culver City in front of a green screen. (*Stands up, knocks over lights, startles gaffer*) Do you begrudge me staying home? How many more places must I come to this year? Isn't it enough that I've entertained you in movies across more than three decades, from 'Days of Thunder' (*shakes out hair*) to 'The Hours' (*feigns attaching prosthetic nose to face*) to 'Aquaman'? (*Rubs fingers together in money gesture*) Doesn't it count for anything that the Nicole Kidman upscale pseudo-feminist sexy murder mystery has become a peak-TV staple? (*Mimes stabbing an abusive husband while chairing a private-school PTA meeting in a cashmere pants-and-sweater set*) And don't forget the full year I spent shooting 'Eyes Wide Shut.' (*Makes "cuckoo" sign by twirling index finger next to temple*) Must I alone carry the weight of post-pandemic commerce on my sculpted ivory shoulders? I give, and I give, and I give. I endure your tired Botox jokes. Please, don't make me come to any more places ever again." (*Tries to frown, fails*) ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ANNALS OF PSYCHOLOGY

NOT FOOLING ANYONE

The dubious rise of impostor syndrome.

BY LESLIE JAMISON

The psychologists who developed the concept never imagined its current ubiquity.

Long before Pauline Clance developed the idea of the impostor phenomenon—now, to her frustration, more commonly referred to as impostor syndrome—she was known by the nickname Tiny. Born in 1938 and raised in Baptist Valley, in Appalachian Virginia, she was the youngest of six children, the daughter of a sawmill operator who struggled to keep food on the table and gas in the tank of his timber truck. Tiny was ambitious—her photograph appeared in the local newspaper after she climbed onto a table to deliver her rebuttal during a debate tournament—but she was always second-guessing herself. After nearly every test she took (and usually aced), she would tell her mother, "I think I failed it." She was shocked when she beat the football-team captain for class president. She was the first in her family to go to college—a high-school counsellor warned her, "You'll be doing well if you get C's"—after which she earned a Ph.D. in psychology, at the University of Kentucky. But, everywhere she went, Clance felt the same nagging sense of self-doubt, the suspicion that she'd somehow tricked everyone else into thinking she belonged.

In the early seventies, as an assistant professor at Oberlin College, Clance kept hearing female students confessing experiences that reminded her of her own: they were sure they'd failed exams, even if they always did well; they were convinced that they'd been admitted because there had been an error on their test scores or that they'd fooled authority figures into thinking they were smarter than they actually were. Clance began comparing notes with one of her colleagues, Suzanne Imes, about their shared feelings of fraudulence. Imes had grown up in Abilene, Texas, with an older sister who early on had been deemed "the smart one"; as a high schooler, Imes had confessed anxieties to her mother that sounded exactly like the ones Clance had to hers. Imes particularly remembered crying after a Latin test, telling her mother, "I know I failed" (among other things, she'd forgotten the word for "farmer"). When it turned out that she'd got an A, her mother said, "I never want to hear about this again." But her accomplishment didn't make the feelings go away; it only made her stop talking about them. Until she met Clance.

One evening, they threw a party for some of the Oberlin students, complete with strobe lights and dancing. But the students looked disappointed and said, "We thought we were going to be learning something." They were hypervigilant, so intent on staving off the possibility of failure that they couldn't let loose for even a night. So Clance and Imes turned the party into a class, setting up a circle of chairs and encouraging the students to talk. After some of them confessed that they felt like "impostors" among their brilliant classmates, Clance and Imes started referring to the feelings they were observing as "the impostor phenomenon."

The pair spent five years talking to more than a hundred and fifty "successful" women: students and faculty members at several universities; professionals in fields including law, nursing, and social work. Then they recorded their findings in a paper, "The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention." They wrote that women in their sample were particularly prone to "an internal experience of intellectual phoniness," living

ILLUSTRATION BY SOPHI MIYOKO GULLBRANTS

in perpetual fear that "some significant person will discover that they are indeed intellectual impostors." But it was precisely this process of discovery that helped Clance and Imes formulate the concept—as they recognized feelings in each other, and in their students, that they'd been experiencing all their lives.

At first, the paper kept getting rejected. "Weirdly, we didn't get impostor feelings about that," Clance told me, when I visited her at her home, in Atlanta. "We believed in what we were trying to say." It was eventually published in 1978, in the journal *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*. The paper spread like an underground zine. People kept writing to Clance to ask for copies, and she sent out so many that the person working the copy machine in her department asked, "What are you doing with all these?" For decades, Clance and Imes saw their concept steadily gaining traction—in 1985, Clance published a book, "The Impostor Phenomenon," and also released an official "I.P. scale" for researchers to license for use in their own studies—but it wasn't until the rise of social media that the idea, by now rebranded as "impostor syndrome," truly exploded.

Almost fifty years after its formulation, the concept has achieved a level of cultural saturation that Clance and Imes never imagined. Clance maintains a list of studies and articles that have referenced their original idea; it is now more than two hundred pages long. The concept has inspired a micro-industry of self-help books, ranging in tone from #girlboss self-empowered sass ("The Middle Finger Project: Trash Your Imposter Syndrome and Live the Unf*ckwithable Life You Deserve") to unapologetic earnestness ("Yes! You Are Good Enough: End Imposter Syndrome, Overthinking and Perfectionism and Do What YOU Want"). "The Imposter Syndrome Workbook" invites readers to draw their impostor voice as a creature or a monster of their choosing, to cross-examine their negative self-talk, and to fill a "Self-Love Mason Jar" with written affirmations and accomplishments.

The phrase "impostor syndrome" often elicits a fierce sense of identification, especially from millennial and Gen X women. When I put out a call on Twitter for experiences of impostor syndrome, I was flooded with responses. "Do you have room in your inbox for roughly 180,000 words?" a high-level publishing executive wrote. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin confessed that her feelings of fraudulence were so strong that she'd been unable to enter the college's library for her entire first year. A university administrator said, "I grew up on a pig farm in rural Illinois. Whenever I attend a fancy event, even if it is one I am producing, I feel like people will still see hayseed in my hair." An artisanal-cider maker wrote, "I've made endless ciders, but each and every time that I start fermenting, my mind goes, 'This is the one when everyone will find out you don't know what you're doing.' "

The eminent are not immune. In fact, Clance and Imes argued forcefully in their original study that success was not a cure. Maya Angelou once said, "I have written eleven books, but each time I think, Uh-oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out." Neil Gaiman, in a commencement address that went viral, described his fear of being busted by the "fraud police," whom he imagined showing up at his door with a clipboard to tell him he had no right to live the life he was living. (Although men do report feeling like impostors, the experience is primarily associated with women, and the word "impostor" has been granted special feminized forms—"impostrix," "impostress"—since the sixteen-hundreds.)

Clance and Imes remain stunned by how broadly their idea has circulated. "We had no idea," Imes said. "We were just as surprised as everyone else." But their ambitions were never small. "We saw suffering in a lot of people, and we hoped we could help," Imes told me. "We wanted to change people's lives."

Clance lives in a craftsman bungalow in Druid Hills, a leafy Atlanta neighborhood. When I visited, the first thing that I noticed in the front hallway was a wooden statue of a naked woman triumphantly holding a mask above her head. Masks feature prominently in Clance's writing on the impostor phenomenon. Her book has three main sections—"Putting on the Mask," "The Personality Behind the Mask," and "Taking Off the Mask"—and argues that impostor feelings come from a conviction that "I have to mask who I am."

Now eighty-four years old, Clance has a slight, birdlike frame and is nimble-minded and affable. Draped in a wool blanket and sipping on a protein shake, she told me about years of therapeutic work with clients experiencing the impostor phenomenon, work that often focussed on early family dynamics. Clance and Imes's original paper identified two distinct family patterns that gave rise to impostor feelings: either women had a sibling who had been identified as "the smart one" or else they themselves had been identified as "superior in every way—intellect, personality, appearance, talent." The pair theorized that women in the first group are driven to find the validation they didn't get at home but end up doubting whatever validation later comes their way; those in the second group encounter a disconnect between their parents' unrealistic faith in their capacities and the experience of fallibility that life inevitably brings. For both types of "impostors," the crisis comes from the disjunction between the messages received from their parents and the messages received from the world. Are my parents right (that I'm inadequate), or is the world right (that I'm capable)? Or, conversely, are my parents right (that I'm perfect), or is the world right (that I'm failing)? This gap gives rise to a conviction that either the parent is wrong or the world is.

The impostor begins to do everything possible to prevent being discovered in her self-perceived deficiencies. Clance and Imes cite one client who, as a child, "pretended to be 'sick' for three consecutive Fridays when spelling bees were held. She could not bear the thought of her parents finding out she could not win the spelling contest." Another client pretended to be playing with art supplies instead of studying whenever her mother walked into the room, because her mother had taught her that naturally smart people don't have to study.

Clance and Imes describe the cycle

Farley Katz

"If the clients want to put a pin in my idea, I'll put a pin in them!"

that impostor feelings often produce—a sense of impending failure that inspires frenzied hard work, and short-lived gratification when failure is staved off, quickly followed by the return of the old conviction that failure is imminent. Some women adopt a kind of magical thinking about their pessimism: daring to believe in success would actually doom them to failure, so failure must be anticipated instead. The typical case hides her own opinions, fearing that they will be seen as stupid; she might seek the approval of a mentor but then believe it has been secured only because of charm or appeal; she may hate herself for even needing this validation, taking the need itself as proof of her intellectual phoniness.

Repeated successes usually don't break the cycle, Clance and Imes emphasize. All the frenzied efforts and mental calculations that are directed into preventing the discovery of one's inadequacy and fraudulence ultimately just reinforce the belief in this inadequate, fraudulent version of the self.

Clance has seen clients healed not by success but by the kind of resonance she found with Imes. Bolstered and sustained by group therapy with other women—it's easier to believe *other* women aren't impostors—they can then bring this recognition of others' delusion back to themselves. Sometimes Clance asked clients to keep a notebook recording how they deflected compliments (reminding me of a woman who tweeted about reckoning with impostor feelings by creating a file on her computer called "evidence I'm not an idiot"). Clance also often gave clients "homework assignments," such as asking them to study for only six hours for an upcoming test, rather than twelve. The mere idea of this gave me a pang of anxiety, and I ventured that it would be terrible if they ended up failing as a result. She nodded. "Yep. Then you really set them back."

Clance and Imes have remained friends, and both relocated from Ohio to Atlanta nearly forty years ago—Clance to teach at Georgia State, Imes to get a Ph.D. there. For a while, they even practiced therapy in the same building, a stucco house tucked away at the end of a long, shaded driveway, where Imes still sees clients. I met her there the day after Stacey Abrams lost her second gubernatorial bid, and the neighborhood was peppered with lawn signs that now seemed elegiac. Imes's office was a cozy den of soft couches and throw pillows, walls hung with quilts, and a Peruvian rice goddess dangling above us—necklace-draped, wings outstretched.

Imes has white curly hair and wore dark-red lipstick and bulky clogs that she slipped off immediately—"I think better without my shoes"—so that she could place her feet beside me on the couch. (Later, she told me she has written on the role of physical touch in therapy.) A bookshelf behind her featured family photos from her clients. Imes asked if I got anxious before interviews like this—confessing that she always does—and soon I was talking about how shy I'd been in junior high school, and how I still worried that the wrong interview questions would expose how little I knew about the subject, or somehow reveal that I'm not a "real" journalist. Run-of-the-mill impostor feelings.

Imes told me that her own impostor feelings flared up when she was applying for Ph.D. programs while studying at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. But as a therapist she found the Gestalt approach well suited to reckoning with such feelings; she explained that the Gestalt method involves owning all the various parts of yourself, accepting them instead of trying to get rid of them, and understanding their function in the larger whole. In this way, the approach offers not only an antidote to the belief in a shameful self at the core of one's being, a kernel that must be concealed, but also an intrinsic understanding of the self as many selves, rather than static or overly coherent.

Both Imes and Clance underwent Gestalt therapy, and Clance found that the work helped her recognize more fully what her mother—not always a deeply nurturing presence in her life—had done for her, and for their whole family. When I asked Clance if reckoning with delusions about her own deficiency had been connected to reckoning with the primal delusion of her mother as a "deficient" mother, she said yes, absolutely. Ultimately, she felt that her mother was able to appreciate the career she'd built, and the person she'd become. One time, she was visiting home and her mother called on her to talk to a relative in distress: "Tiny, you need to get down here, because he's going to kill himself!" The request seemed like proof that her mother understood the importance of her work. In that moment, Clance felt some congruence between the messages she was getting from the world and the messages she was getting from her mother, a bridging of the gap she'd helped other women notice in their childhoods.

As part of the process of understanding and accepting various aspects of the self, Gestalt often involves "empty-chair" work, in which you might have an imagined conversation with someone important—a dead mother, a former lover—and play out both parts of the conversation, sometimes switching chairs, in order to reckon with the lasting influence of the relationship. A philosophy pointed toward integration makes sense as an antidote to impostor feelings, which can fuel a selective self-presentation driven by shame: I can show only this part of myself and must keep that part of myself hidden.

One of the cornerstones of the work Clance and Imes did with their clients was an empty-chair exercise in which they were asked to imagine having conversations with all the authority figures they'd ever "tricked" into thinking they were smarter or more competent than they actually were. Clance would gently invite them to consider the ways that their impostor feelings constituted, implicitly, a kind of solipsism—understanding everyone else as so easily tricked—telling them, "Line up all the professors you fooled and say, 'I fooled you!' "

The first time I used the phrase "impostor syndrome" about myself, I was—as it happens—describing experiences I'd had with my own professors. This was 2015, and I'd given a lecture at a small liberal-arts college in Michigan. At a dinner afterward, I found myself telling a professor about the anxieties I'd experienced as a Ph.D. student. In seminars, I often felt as if anything I said aloud would reveal that I did not understand the first thing about Heidegger; or that I had read only three chapters of "Discipline and Punish." Once, in a moment of panic, I'd said I *loved* Donna Haraway, afraid to confess that I'd never read her at all, and I was sometimes confronted with this fraudulent love, an impostor even in my affinities.

The experience I was trying to describe was more specific than mere self-doubt; it was a fear of being *found out*, revealed for what I really was. And it was an anxiety that I felt complicit in, having produced these false fronts with my lies. I didn't feel that I was saying anything particularly dramatic. By then, impostor syndrome was already something that people routinely confessed about their experiences in high-achieving environments. But it did feel like a genuine exposure of various low-key humiliations: the blooming circles of dark sweat under my armpits as I larded my sentences with jargon, the scrambled, panicked posturing of theoretical preferences.

Once I'd finished this brief summary of my impostor syndrome—trying on the term, which wasn't one I could remember using before—my dinner companion, another white female academic, replied curtly, "That's such a white-lady thing to say."

In the wake of her comment, the table quieted a bit as people sensed—the way a constellation of strangers often can—the presence of some minor friction. My seatmate and I turned to the only woman of color at the table, a Black professor, so that she could, presumably, tell us what to think about the whiteness of impostor syndrome, though perhaps there were things she wanted to do (like finish eating dinner) more than she wanted to mediate a spat between two white ladies about whether we were saying white-lady things or not. She graciously explained that she didn't particularly identify with the experience. She hadn't often felt like an impostor, because she had more frequently found herself in situations where her competence or intelligence had been underestimated than in ones where it was taken for granted.

In the years since then, I've heard many women of color—friends, colleagues, students, and people I've interviewed on the subject—articulate some version of this sentiment. Lisa Factora-Borchers, a Filipinx American author and activist, told me, "Whenever I'd hear white friends talk about impostor syndrome, I'd wonder, How can you think you're an impostor when every mold was made for you? When you see mirror reflections of yourself everywhere, and versions of what your success might look like?"

Adaira Landry, an emergency-medicine physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital and a faculty member at Harvard Medical School, told me about her first day at the U.C.L.A. med school. Landry, a first-generation college student from an African American family, met a fellow first-year student, a man, who was already wearing a white coat, although they hadn't yet had their white-coat ceremony. His mother was in health care and his sister was in med school, and they'd informed him that if he wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon, which he did, it would be beneficial to start shadowing someone immediately. Landry went home that night feeling dispirited, as if she were already falling behind, and a classmate told her, "Don't worry, you just have impostor syndrome."

For Landry, this was only the first of many instances of what she calls "the misdiagnosis of impostor syndrome." Landry understands now that what her classmate characterized as a crisis of self-doubt was simply an observation of an external truth—the concrete impact of connections and privilege. Eventually, Landry looked up Clance and Imes's 1978 paper; she didn't identify with the people described in it. "They interviewed a set of primarily white women lacking confidence, despite being surrounded by an educational system and workforce that seemed to recognize their excellence," she told me. "As a Black woman, I was unable to find myself in that paper."

Since then, Landry has had countless conversations with students who feel they are struggling with impostor syndrome, and she usually senses a palpable relief when she suggests that they are feeling like this not because there is something wrong with them but because they are "enveloped in a system that fails to support them." Ironically, her students' relief at being liberated from the label of impostor syndrome reminds me of the relief that Clance and Imes witnessed when they first offered the concept to their clients. In both cases, women were being told, "You are not an impostor. You are enough." In one case, an experience was diagnosed; in the other, the diagnosis was removed.

In 2020, almost fifty years after Clance and Imes collaborated on their article, another pair of women collaborated on an article about impostor syndrome—this one pushing back fiercely against the idea. In "Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome," published in the *Harvard Business Review,* in February, 2021, Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey argue that the label implies that women are suffering from a crisis of self-confidence and fails to recognize the real obstacles facing professional women, especially women of color—essentially, that it reframes systemic inequality as an individual pathology. As they put it, "Imposter syndrome directs our view toward fixing women at work instead of fixing the places where women work."

Tulshyan started hearing the term a decade ago, when she left a job in journalism to work in the Seattle tech industry. She was attending women's leadership conferences where it seemed that everyone was talking about impostor syndrome and "the confidence gap," but no one was talking about gender bias and systemic racism. She got tired of hearing women, especially white women—her own heritage is Indian Singaporean—comparing notes on who had the most severe impostor syndrome. It seemed like another version of women sharing worries about their weight, a kind of communal self-deprecation that reiterated oppressive metrics rather than disrupting them.

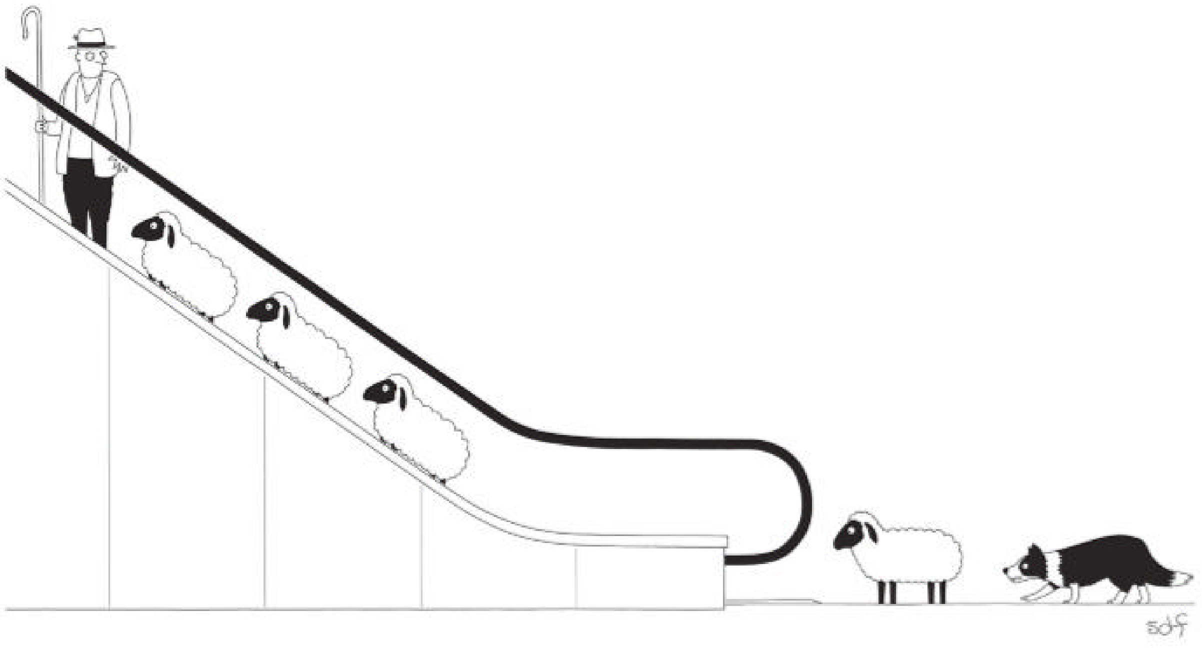
During the early pandemic, she met up with Burey—another woman of color working in Seattle tech—for an outdoor lunch, and they compared notes on their shared frustration with the idea of impostor syndrome. There was a tremendous feeling of relief and resonance. As Tulshyan put it, "It was like everybody is telling you the sky is green, and suddenly you tell your friend, I think the sky is blue, and she sees it this way as well."

Burey, who was born in Jamaica, didn't feel like an impostor; she felt enraged by the systems that had been built to disenfranchise her. She also didn't experience any yearning to belong, to inhabit certain spaces of power. "White women want to access power, they want to sit at the table," she told me. "Black women say, This table is rotten, this table is hurting everyone." She resisted knee-jerk empowerment rhetoric that seemed to encourage a damaging bravado: "I didn't want to beef up myself to inflict more harm."

At their lunch, Tulshyan mentioned that she was writing a piece about impostor syndrome, and Burey immediately asked her, "Did you read the original article?" Like Adaira Landry, Burey had felt impelled to look it up and had been struck by its limitations. It wasn't a clinical study but a set of anecdotal observations, she told Tulshyan, largely gleaned from "high-achieving" white women who had received much affirmation from the world. "I must have spoken for twenty minutes uninterrupted," Burey recalled. After that, Tulshyan said, "It's done. We're collaborating."

Like Clance and Imes, Tulshyan and Burey recognized in each other versions of the feelings that they themselves had been harboring—only these were feelings about the world, rather than about their psyches. They were sick of people talking about women having impostor syndrome rather than talking about biases in hiring, promotion, leadership, and compensation. They came to believe that a concept designed to liberate women from their shame—to help them confront the delusion of their own insufficiency—had become yet another way to keep them disempowered.

"Then you make a little well in the middle for the water…"



When I asked Clance and Imes about Tulshyan and Burey's critiques, they agreed with many of them, conceding that their original sample and parameters were limited. Although their model had actually acknowledged (rather than obscured) the role that external factors played in creating impostor feelings, it focussed on things such as family dynamics and gender socialization rather than on systemic racism and other legacies of inequality. But they also pointed out that the popularization of their idea as a "syndrome" had distorted it. Every time Imes hears the phrase "impostor syndrome," she told me, it lodges in her gut. It's technically incorrect, and conceptually misleading. As Clance explained, the phenomenon is "an experience rather than a pathology," and their aim was always to normalize this experience rather than to pathologize it. Their concept was never meant to be a solution for inequality and prejudice in the workplace—a task for which it would necessarily prove insufficient. Indeed, Clance's own therapeutic practice was anything but oblivious of the external structural forces highlighted by Tulshyan and Burey. When mothers came to Clance describing their impostor feelings around parenting, her advice was not "Work on your feelings." It was "Get more child care."

Tulshyan and Burey never anticipated how much attention their article would receive. It has been translated and published all over the world, and is one of the most widely shared articles in the history of the *Harvard Business Review*. They heard from people who had been given negative performance evaluations that featured euphemisms for impostor syndrome ("lacks confidence" or "lacks executive presence") and even refused promotions on these grounds. The diagnosis has become a cultural force fortifying the very phenomenon it was supposed to cure.

As the backlash against the concept of impostor syndrome spreads, other critiques have emerged. If everyone has it, does it exist at all? Or are we simply experiencing a kind of humility inflation? Perhaps the widespread practice of confessing self-doubt has begun to encourage—to *demand*, even—repeated confessions of the very experience that the original concept was trying to dissolve. The writer and comedian Viv Groskop believes that impostor syndrome has become a blanket term obscuring countless other problems, everything from long COVID to the patriarchy. She told me a story about standing in front of five hundred women and telling them, "Raise your hand if you have experienced impostor syndrome." Almost every woman raised her hand. When Groskop asked, "Who here has *never* experienced impostor syndrome?," only one (brave) woman did. But, at the end of the talk, this outlier came up to apologize—worried that it was somehow arrogant *not* to have impostor syndrome.

Hearing this story, I began to wonder if I'd confessed my own feelings of impostor syndrome to Dr. Imes as a kind of admission fee, to claim my seat—like putting my ante into the pot at a poker game. Who had made it possible for me to play this game? When I asked my mother, who is seventy-eight, if the concept resonated, she said it didn't; she'd struggled more with proving herself than with feeling like a fraud. She told me she suspected that most women in her generation (and even more in her mother's) were likelier to feel the opposite—"that we were being underestimated."

For many younger women, there's a horoscope effect at play: certain aspects of the experience, if defined capaciously enough, are so common as to be essentially universal. The Australian scholar and critic Rebecca Harkins-Cross—who often felt like an impostor during her university days, struggling with insecurities she now connects to her working-class background—has become suspicious of the ways impostor syndrome serves a capitalist culture of striving. She told me, "Capitalism needs us *all* to feel like impostors, because feeling like an impostor ensures we'll strive for endless progress: work harder, make more money, try to be better than our former selves and the people around us."

On the flip side, this relentless pressure deepens the exhilarating allure of people—specifically, women—who truly *are* impostors but refuse to see themselves as such. Think of the mass fascination with the antiheroine Anna Delvey (a.k.a. Anna Sorokin), who masqueraded as an heiress in order to infiltrate a wealthy world of New York socialites, and the hypnotic train wreck of Elizabeth Holmes, who built a nine-billion-dollar company based on fraudulent claims about her ability to diagnose a variety of diseases from a single drop of blood. Why do these women enthrall us? In the television adaptations that turned their lives into soap operas—"Inventing Anna" and "The Dropout"—their hubris offers a thrilling counterpoint to beleaguered self-doubt: Anna's extravagant cash tips and gossamer caftans, her willingness to overstay her welcome on a yacht in Ibiza, her utter conviction—even once she was in jail—that it was the *world* that had been wrong, rather than her.

These stories gleaned much of their narrative momentum from the constant threat of revelation: when would these impostors be discovered? Paying for things on credit without being able to afford them literalizes a crucial facet of impostor syndrome: the anxiety that you are getting what you have not paid for and do not deserve; that you will eventually be found out, and your bill will come due. (Capitalism always wants you to believe you have a bill to pay.) Part of the lure of these stories is the looming satisfaction of seeing the impostors revealed and exposed. For some of us, it's akin to the pleasure of pushing on a bruise, watching the community punish the impostor we believe exists inside ourselves.

Ruchika Tulshyan told me, "If it was up to me, we would do away with the idea of impostor syndrome entirely." Jodi-Ann Burey allows that the concept has been useful in corporate contexts, offering a shared language for talking about self-doubt and a "soft entry" into conversations about toxic workplaces, but she, too, feels it is time to bid it farewell. She wants to say, "Thank you for your fifty years of service," and to start looking directly at systems of bias, rather than falsely pathologizing individuals.

Is there some version of impostor syndrome that can be salvaged? Pulling back from the corporate world to look at the concept more broadly, it seems clear that the #girlboss branding of impostor syndrome has done a disservice to the concept as well as to the workplaces it has failed to improve. The tale of these two pairs of women—Clance and Imes formulating their idea in the seventies, and Tulshyan and Burey pushing back in 2020—belongs to the larger intellectual story of second-wave feminism receiving necessary correctives from the third wave. Much of this corrective work results from women of color asking white feminism to acknowledge a complicated matrix of external forces—including structural racism and income inequality—at play in every internal experience. Identifying impostor feelings does not necessitate denying the forces that produced them. It can, in fact, demand the opposite: understanding that the damage from these external forces often becomes part of the internal weave of the self. Although many of the most fervent critics of impostor syndrome are women of color, it's also the case that many people of color do identify with the experience. In fact, research studies have repeatedly shown that impostor syndrome disproportionately affects them. This finding contradicts what I was told years ago—that impostor syndrome is a "white lady" problem—and suggests instead that the people most vulnerable to the syndrome are not the ones it first described.

If we reclaim the impostor phenomenon from the false category of "syndrome," then we can allow it to do the work it does best, which is to depict a particular texture of interior experience: the fear of being exposed as inadequate. As a concept, it is most useful in its particular nuances—not as a vague synonym for insecurity or self-doubt but as a way to describe the more specific delusion of being a fraud who has successfully deceived some external audience. Understood like this, it becomes an experience not diluted but defined by its ubiquity. It names the gap that persists between the internal experiences of selfhood—multiple, contradictory, incoherent, striated with shame and desire—and the imperative to present a more coherent, composed, continuous self to the world.

The psychoanalyst Nuar Alsadir, in her book "Animal Joy," explains impostor syndrome by drawing on D. W. Winnicott's concepts of "false self" and "true self." She sees the anxiety as stemming from "a False Self that is so fortified by layers of compliant behavior that it loses contact with the raw impulses and expressions that characterize the True Self." Attempts to prevent the discovery of one's "true self" end up compounding the belief that this self, were it ever discovered, would be rejected and dismissed.

Impostor feelings often arise most acutely from threshold-crossing—from one social class to another, one culture to another, one vocation to another—something akin to what Pierre Bourdieu called the "split habitus," the self dwelling in two worlds at once. The college library and the sawmill. The fancy parties and the pig farm. When I spoke to Stephanie Land, the best-selling author of "Maid," her memoir about cleaning houses to support herself as a single mother, she described her own impostor feelings as an experience of class whiplash: occupying spaces of privilege after she'd grown famous for writing about economic hardship. When she flew first class with her teen-age daughter to see a Lizzo concert, and a stranger thanked her for her writing, Land felt that she'd been caught somewhere she didn't belong—as if flying first class made her current self a fraud, or else her past self a fraud; or somehow both versions of her were fraudulent at once.

Land's sense of impostordom also stems from the fact that her personal story is frequently interpreted as a consoling fable of class mobility. "I'm very conscious that my story is the palatable kind of poor-person story," she has written. "I am Little Orphan Annie skipping around in new shoes." When people love her story, she told me, they are loving a version of the American Dream that she thinks of as the American Myth. When her life is distorted and misunderstood in this way, it becomes a kind of impostor plot—and it makes her feel like an impostor as well.

Land's observations helped me realize that the impostor phenomenon, as a concept, effectively functions as an emotional filing cabinet organizing a variety of fraught feelings that we can experience as we try to reconcile three aspects of our personhood: how we experience ourselves, how we present ourselves to the world, and how the world reflects that self back to us. The phenomenon names an unspoken, ongoing crisis arising from the gaps between these various versions of the self, and designates not a syndrome but an inescapable part of being alive. ♦

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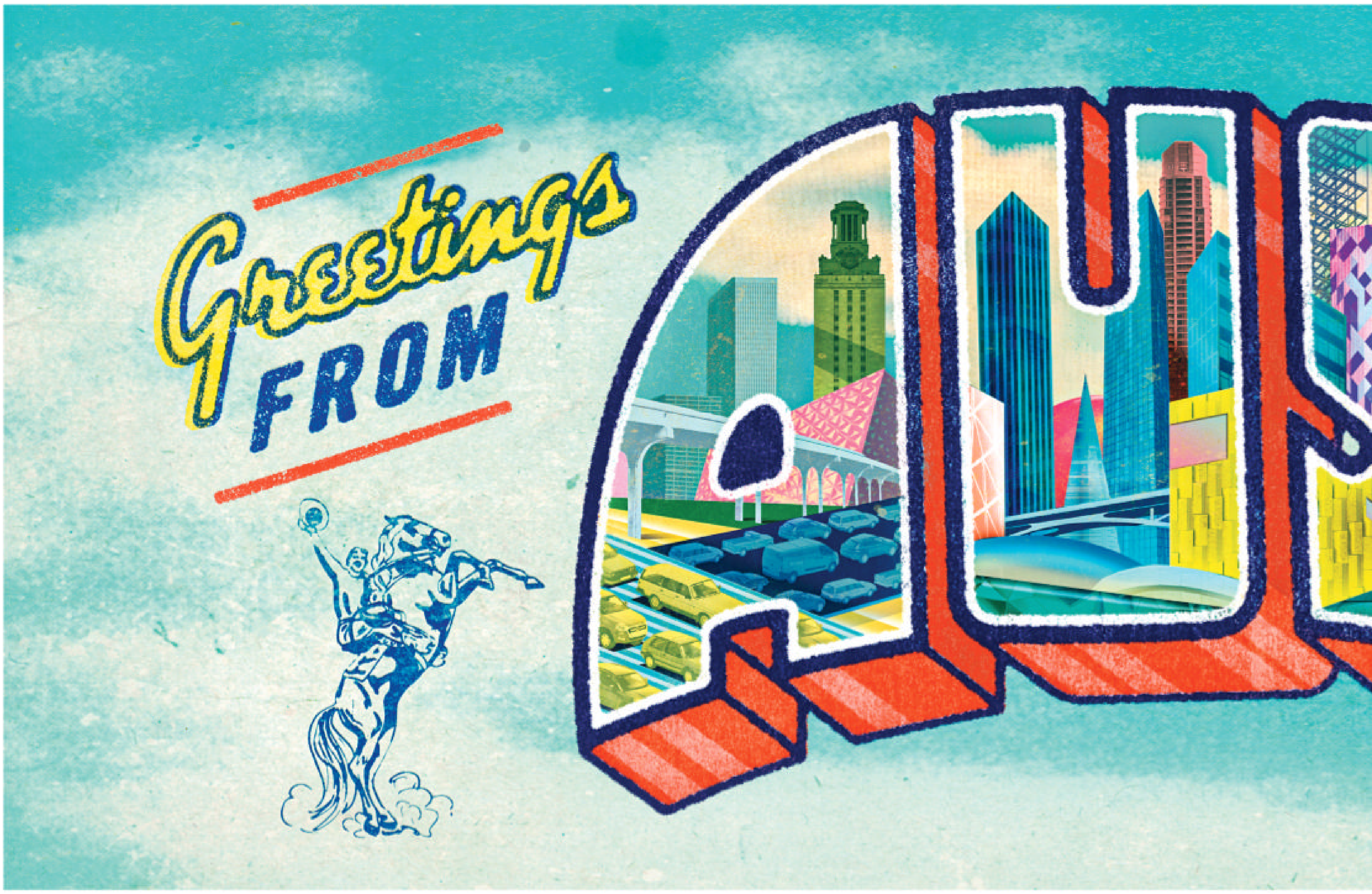


LETTER FROM TEXAS

NO CITY LIMITS

My town, Austin, known for laid-back weirdness, is transforming into a turbocharged tech capital.

BY LAWRENCE WRIGHT

A person can live in many places but can settle in only one. You may not understand the difference until you've found the city or the town or the patch of countryside that sounds a distinct internal chord. For much of my life, I was on the move. I grew up in Texas, in Abilene and Dallas, but as soon as the gate opened I fled the sterile culture, the retrograde politics, the absence of natural beauty. I met my wife, Roberta, in New Orleans. She was also on the run, from the racism and suffocating conformity of Mobile, Alabama. In our married life, we have lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Cairo, Egypt; Quitman, Texas; Durham, North Carolina; Nashville; and Atlanta—all desirable places with much to recommend. We travelled the world. I have spent stretches of my professional life in the places you would expect—New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., all cities that I revere, but not places we chose to settle.

Unconsciously, during those vagabond years, we were on the lookout for home. I nursed a conception of an ideal community, one that combined qualities I loved about other places: the physical beauty, say, of Atlanta; the joyful music-making of New Orleans; an intellectual scene fed by an important university, as in Cambridge or Durham; a place with a healthy energy and ready access to nature, such as Denver or Seattle; a spot where we could comfortably find friends and safely raise children. I'm not saying that we couldn't have been happy in any of the places I've mentioned, but something kept us from profoundly identifying with them.

In 1980, I joined the writing staff of *Texas Monthly*, in Austin. The population then was a little more than three hundred thousand—the current size of Lexington, Kentucky. Thirteen per cent of Austin residents were University of Texas students; another five per cent were faculty and staff. The only other significant presence in town was the state capitol. You could park free on most streets. Of the limited offering of restaurants in town, we favored the Raw

Refugees from Silicon Valley, Hollywood, and New York are stampeding into the city, with outsized power to shape its future.

Deal, a greasy spoon where, for five bucks, you could choose between the pork chop and the sirloin, accompanied by red beans and Pabst Blue Ribbon. Above the register was the surly admonition "Remember: you came looking for the Raw Deal—the Raw Deal didn't come looking for you."

Life in Austin was offbeat, affordable, spontaneous, blithe, and slyly amused, as if we were in on some hilarious secret the rest of the world was unaware of. Even then, the place had a reputation for being cool, but in my experience it was just extremely relaxed, almost to the point of stupor. There was a reason that the director Richard Linklater titled his 1990 portrait of the city "Slacker." I was happy to be in Austin for a while: it embodied all the things I still loved about Texas—the friendliness, the vitality, the social mobility—yet it also stood against the mean-spiritedness of the state's politics, despite being the capital city. Staying, though, violated my resolution to keep my distance from Texas. But Roberta declared that she was never going to live anyplace else.

"Keep Austin Weird" was the city's unofficial motto—you saw it on bumper stickers, guitar cases, and VW buses, often alongside another slogan, "Onward Thru the Fog." That one is harder to explain. In 1967, Gilbert Shelton, the creator of the "Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers" comic books, imagined a character named Oat Willie—a scrawny, bare-chested guy with a Pinocchio nose, wearing polka-dot underwear, carrying a blazing torch, and standing in a bucket of oats on wheels. Austin's druggy counterculture adopted the character as its mascot; a popular head shop was named Oat Willie's. An origin story explained the character. Oat, a student at U.T., was conducting an experiment on oat seeds when he was shocked by the news that President Kennedy had been assassinated: "Thunderstruck, he failed to notice that his hand had brushed a control knob, releasing RADIOACTIVE ELEMENTS into his oat bucket!" When Oat Willie climbed into the bucket to mash the oats, the RADIOACTIVE ELEMENTS caused his feet to fuse to the bottom. There was no remedy, so he attached wheels to the bucket, like an early Segway. After various adventures, Oat Willie wound up in New York, arriving as fog smothered the city. People were stranded. "SAVE ME!" they cried. "WHERE ARE MY HANDS?" Fortunately, the oat bucket floated, and Oat managed to paddle to the Statue of Liberty and borrow her torch. As he guided New Yorkers to safety, he cried, "Onward through the fog!" If this makes sense to you, you should have been in Austin back in the day.

The city was pretty, with cypress-lined Lady Bird Lake dividing it between north and south. A burgeoning literary scene grew out of *Texas Monthly*, and hundreds of working bands filled clubs and dives. There were a handful of tall buildings downtown, mostly banks. I recall standing in the conference room on the top floor of the tallest one, a twenty-six-story tower, and looking out at Austin's unobstructed downtown core: parking lots and warehouses and a small commercial district. To the north was the gorgeous capitol, fashioned from pinkish granite, and beyond that the University of Texas, whose buildings were made of limestone and Spanish tiles. To the south, across the river, was

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN NORTHEAST

Travis Heights, the neighborhood where we lived at the time and where Roberta taught at a public elementary school. West of that was Zilker Park and its hallowed swimming hole, Barton Springs. On the east side were the communities of color, segregated from the rest of the city by I-35, sometimes called the Interracial Highway. For all its charms, Austin was beset by racial divisions that have undermined its character and its reputation to this day.

Residents appreciated that Austin felt like a small town. Though we endured a lot of inconveniences—you had to change planes if you wanted to go almost anywhere out of state—it seemed worth the trade-off. We looked at Dallas and Houston with dread. The mantra was "If we don't build it, they won't come." I hoped that Austin, if it did grow, would initiate height restrictions that would keep the city humanely proportioned, like Washington or Paris. Who needed skyscrapers in Austin? Everywhere you looked, there was vacant or scarcely used land.

Several months ago, I got to induct Joe Ely, the rocking Texas troubadour, into the Austin City Limits Hall of Fame. I spoke about how Ely, a Lubbock native, had moved to Austin as a young guitarist, alternating shows with Stevie Ray Vaughan at a club called the One Knite, where they'd make maybe fifteen bucks in tips. Ely had been supplementing his income in a quintessentially Austin fashion: as a llama herder in a circus.

After the induction ceremony, Roberta and I spent a night in the W hotel, adjacent to the Moody Theatre, where "Austin City Limits" is taped. When Roberta opened the blinds, we had a sensation known to every longtime resident: we had no idea where we were. It was difficult even to discern what direction we were facing, because skyscrapers blocked the horizon. Ten building cranes were visible from that one window. Today, two projects are competing to claim the title of tallest building in Texas, one at seventy-four stories and the other at eighty.

I play in a local band with Ricardo Ainslie, a psychologist and professor at the University of Texas. (Rico's on guitar; I'm on keyboards.) He recently told me, "There's a line in 'Civilization and Its Discontents' in which Freud invites the reader to think about Rome not as a geographic space but as a psychic space." We were on the patio of Julio's Café, one of our favorite lunchtime spots, although you have to guard your food from the grackles. "I think it's true," he went on. "We have an emotional relationship to cities. We identify with them—not always without ambivalence." We can complain about traffic, for instance, or the failure of services, "but when any calamity happens we are suddenly aware of the sense of loss or of psychic dislocation. When our cities undergo profound transformation, it poses challenges for us." He added, "No city in America has changed more than Austin has in the last two decades."

Austin is the fastest-growing major metro area in America, having expanded by a third in the past ten years. It is already the eleventh-largest city. New jobs mop up newcomers as fast as they arrive. Every day, the metro area adds three hundred and fifty-five new residents, while two hundred and thirty-eight Austinites depart, many of them squeezed out by high rents and property taxes, or by the disaffection so many of us feel because of the pace of change and the loss of qualities that once defined the city. Austin is now characterized by stifling traffic and unaffordable restaurants. It was never known as a home for billionaires and celebrities, but in the past few years notable refugees from Silicon Valley, Hollywood, and New York have stampeded into town, with different expectations about what Austin should become—and outsized power to shape the city around their desires. Locals point disdainfully to the Hermès shop and the Soho House on South Congress, formerly the funkiest street in town. Evan Smith, a founder of the Texas Tribune, told me, "Austin now has an upper class."

Elon Musk is just one of the recent billionaire arrivals hanging around Austin. There were two or three until not long ago; now I hear there are fourteen. Imagine you invite the new neighbors to a pool party and they turn out to be elephants. When they jump in, it changes things.

Of course, such complaints are signposts of a booming economy—the kinds of problems many people elsewhere would love to have. In any city whose identity is changing, it can be hard to avoid the sense that a golden age has slipped away. Newcomers to Austin fall prey to this nostalgia almost instantly—and, with a longtime resident like me, the symptoms can become comically acute. But the feeling is more like watching someone you love become someone you didn't expect. It doesn't mean that you're not still in love—just that complexity has entered the relationship. Austin forty years ago was like a graduate student with modest tastes and few resources; now she's sporting jewels and flying first class. She's sophisticated, well travelled, and well connected, and those aren't necessarily bad things—they're just disorienting. Nostalgia is a way of remembering when things were simpler; it also makes us forget that simple things can be boring and frustrating. Instead of running on the fumes of memory, I decided to reacquaint myself with the actual Austin I'm living in—a city rapidly transforming into America's next great metropolis.

Austin's future was determined in January, 1983, when Admiral Bob Inman, recently retired from the Navy and from serving as the deputy director of the C.I.A., was selected to head a novel consortium called the Microelectronics and Computer Consortium. Japan dominated the semiconductor-manufacturing industry at the time and had announced an ambitious effort to create computers capable of generating artificial intelligence. The Reagan Administration saw this as a serious threat, and M.C.C. was the response. Twenty of America's foremost high-tech companies—among them Microsoft, Boeing, G.E., and Lockheed—would share resources to secure America's hold on the future. The first decision was where to locate this new entity.

M.C.C. was scheduled to exist for a decade, and the city chosen to host it would inevitably be transformed. The predictable choices would have been Silicon Valley or the Boston suburbs, but Inman—slender and succinct, with arched, skeptical brows—proposed an open competition. Fifty-seven communities bid. It was a commercial auction never before seen in America.

A site-selection committee of Inman and six C.E.O.s held its first round of auditions. Mayors, governors, university chancellors, and business leaders teamed up to make their case. The committee examined various criteria: quality of life, cost of living, tax environment, quality of public education, commute times, airline connections, and access to graduate students in electrical engineering and computer science. In the first round, San Antonio made the best presentation, led by its charismatic mayor, Henry Cisneros. "The one thing he didn't have was a research university," Inman told me.

The contestants narrowed to four: San Diego, Austin, Atlanta, and the Research Triangle. Although Inman was a graduate of the University of Texas, he favored San Diego, a city he'd enjoyed during his Navy days. The team met at the University of California's campus there. George Deukmejian, California's governor, kept the committee waiting for twenty minutes, read a speech, then departed. Such atmospherics mattered. "They would have been far better off if he'd never shown up," Inman concluded.

When the team visited Austin, Pike Powers, the chief of staff to Texas's governor, Mark White, welcomed them to a breakfast in the grand atrium of the L.B.J. Library, hosted by Mrs. Johnson herself—who "served quail," Inman recalled. The team was impressed by Austin's quality of life and affordability. Employees moving to the area were promised reduced mortgage rates. What clinched the deal was the university's commitment to provide a reliable stream of talent. U.T. offered to fund eight chairs in electrical engineering and computer science, at a million dollars each. The university later sweetened its offer by funding thirty-two such chairs, but by then the search committee had made its decision. "Austin won going away," Inman said. "The outcome was a shock to both the East and West Coast."

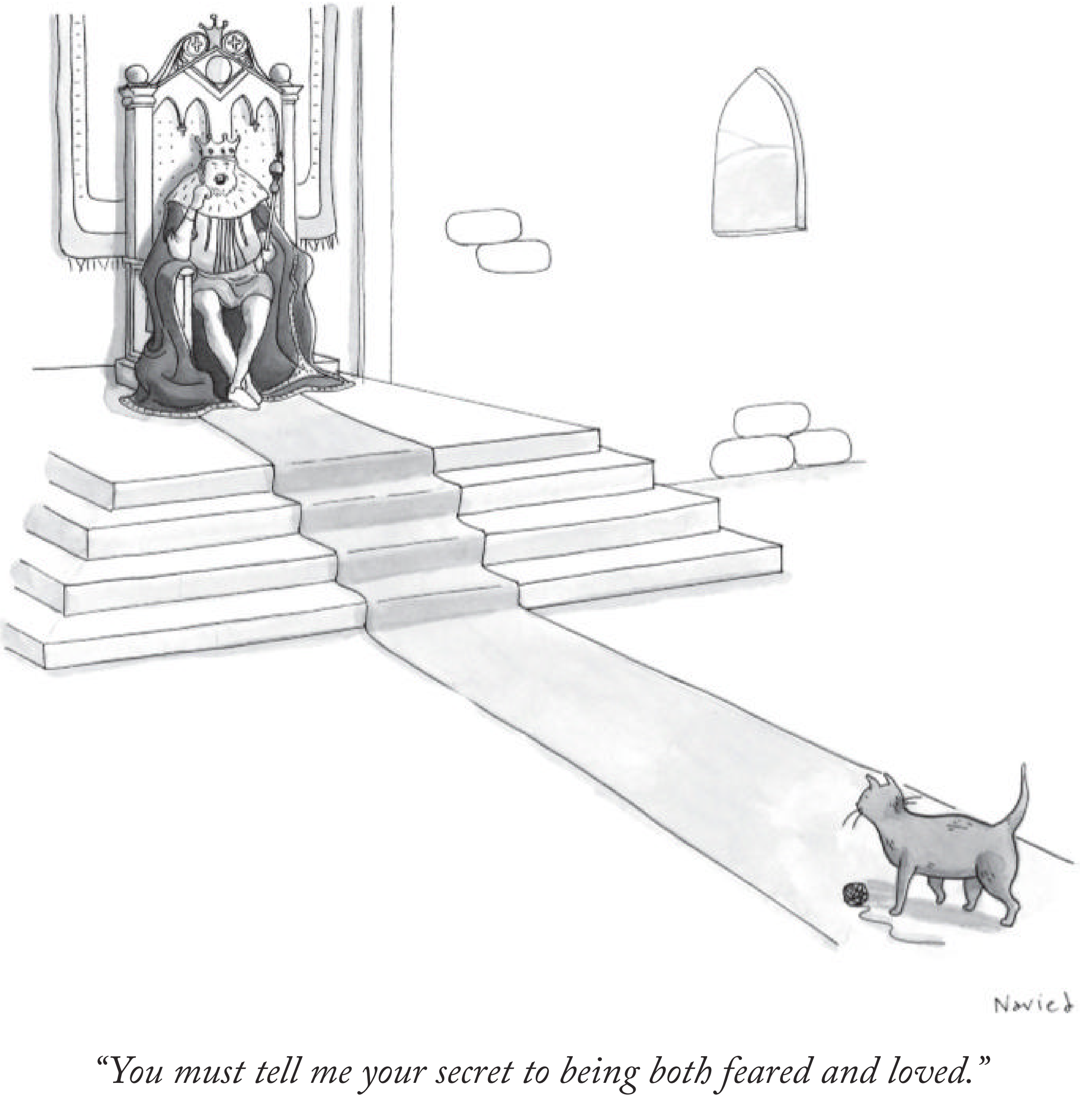
It was a shock to Austin, too. I remember the mixture of amazement and unease that greeted the decision. Back then, Austin was a uniquely liberal entity in Texas—"the blueberry in the tomato soup," to employ the unappealing metaphor that prevailed before all the major cities in the state turned blue, a decade or so ago. You could make the case that, if you drew a line from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco, Austin was the most liberal American city south of that border; at the same time, it harbored a reactionary resistance to change, especially when growth was a likely consequence.

Just as M.C.C. was finishing up its search, a freshman pre-med student at U.T. was upgrading computers in his dorm room from stock parts and securing contracts to provide computers for the State of Texas. His name was Michael Dell. He dropped out at the end of his first year, having capitalized his company with a thousand dollars. His manufacturing team, he later recalled, consisted of "three guys with screwdrivers." By 1992, Dell was the youngest C.E.O. of a Fortune 500 company. He became Austin's first homegrown billionaire.

Dell reminded me that Austin already had a cluster of tech companies. "In the sixties, I.B.M. came," he said. "In the seventies, you had Texas Instruments and Motorola." In 1986, three years after M.C.C. set up in Austin, Sematech, another consortium created to boost semiconductor manufacturing, arrived, bringing along Robert Noyce, the visionary co-founder of Intel. "It was like Benjamin Franklin moving to Austin," Dell told me.

Real wealth marched into town, first with the "Dellionaires" who invested in Dell in its early years. (Thanks to Roberta's urgent counsel, we became modest investors.) No longer were the capitol and the university the city's major economic forces. Austin's cultural appeal wasn't the only lure for tech giants; Texas bestowed fabulous tax incentives.

Other cities longed for such an influx of tech-savvy professionals, but Austinites were ambivalent about the economic bounce. People moved to Austin because of what the city was—but, in the act of moving, they helped obliterate that history. Treasured music clubs were razed to make room for apartments and office buildings. The once crystalline Barton Springs became clouded by runoff from development. The dignified capitol was shadowed by glassy towers that reflected the Texas sun, making sidewalks sizzle. Traffic



"You must tell me your secret to being both feared and loved."

and crime and other big-city stressors made the old days appear more glorious than they actually were.

Every new Austinite brings a bit of the culture he left behind. No matter how interesting the newcomers are, their attitudes, their preferences, their prejudices become novel flavors in the cultural stew. Austin will never taste the same.

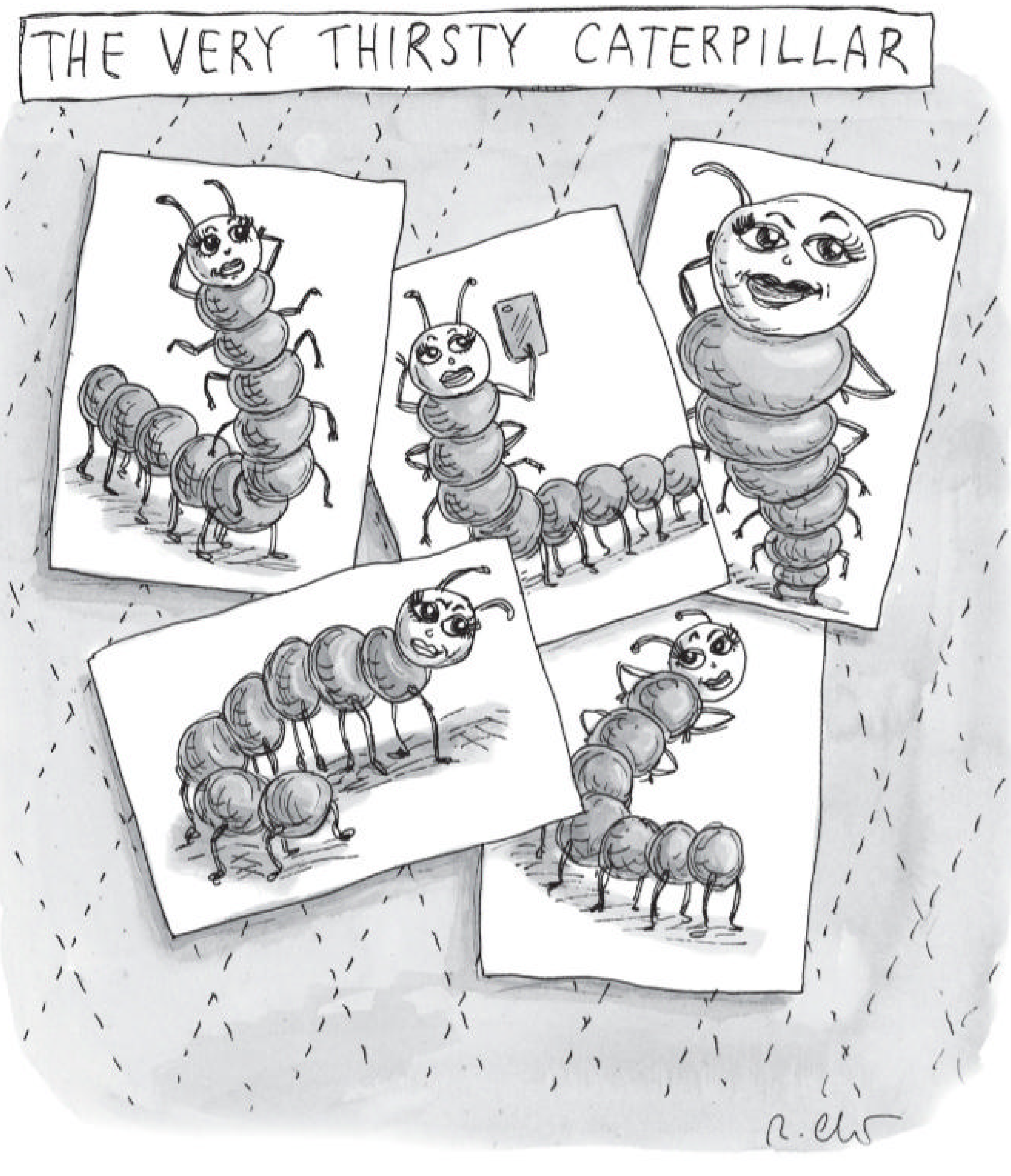
Other Austinites I spoke with had gone through similar searches for an ideal home. Luke Warford grew up in Rhode Island, then lived in New York, Cincinnati, and London, where he went to grad school in economics. He spent a year in Ethiopia. "Every extra dollar I made in my twenties I spent on travel," he told me, as we sat in an East Austin coffee shop. A thirty-three-year-old marathoner with dark-brown hair and beard stubble, he was wearing a memorial baseball cap for the Uvalde massacre. After working at Facebook in Silicon Valley, he decided to put down roots: "I wanted to go someplace I could have a really big impact, and where there's a lot of opportunity, and a place that's young and active." It came down to Denver or Austin. The hike-and-bike trail around Lady Bird Lake—"the most beautiful running spot that you could possibly imagine"—sold him.

Another factor in his decision was politics. "Texas is going to be the most politically consequential state in the next decade," he said, and he wanted to be a part of that. Texas, in his assessment, was "thirty million persons governed by entrenched assholes." Changing that would be a huge undertaking, but Warford likes solving "big, intractable problems." He went to work for the dispirited and ineffectual Texas Democratic Party. He spent a year and a half there before announcing that he was running for railroad commissioner.

For a young man intent on changing the world, there couldn't have been a better choice. The Railroad Commission, its quaint name notwithstanding, has nothing to do with railroads: it regulates oil and gas in the state. There's no more consequential entity in America for managing energy. The failure of the Texas grid in 2021 was a trigger for Warford. Wayne Christian, one of the three commissioners, was up for reëlection the next year. Christian is a Tea-Party Republican who is in the Texas Gospel Music Hall of Fame. He was supported almost entirely by the industry he nominally regulated. His solution to climate change: "Turn the damn air-conditioner up." That proved to be a winning platform.

Warford isn't discouraged by his loss. He's convinced that he'll help Texas eventually flip blue, and that this will change America. Texas rewards risk-taking, he told me: "That's certainly been my experience. I mean, I was a statewide Democratic nominee for a fairly reputable, high-profile office three years after moving here."

Eduardo (Eddie) Margain, an investor in real estate and in oil and gas, has lived in Austin for fifteen years. He has been buying signature buildings downtown, including the noble Driskill hotel—"the grande dame of Texas," he calls it. He also was an organizing force behind bringing professional soccer to Austin, in 2021. Until then, the city was the largest in America without a professional athletic team. Margain and I met at Q2 Stadium, where the soccer team plays. He is intense and energetic, with a narrow face and pale-blue eyes, his hands conducting the conversation. "We sold out every game from the start," he told me, as we walked the beautiful field. His family came from Monterrey, Mexico, in 2008. His father-in-law, Alejandro Junco de la Vega, owns a media conglomerate whose star property is the center-right newspaper *Reforma*. Margain, having seen how violence can take over a country—newspaper offices were firebombed and the family lived under constant threat—has become the head of the Greater Austin Crime Commission. Austin remains one of America's safer cities, but crime has been rising. In the fall of 2020, the city council defunded the police's budget by a third. It also suspended new cadet classes, and although instruction has resumed, the city is woefully short of officers. There's no visible traffic enforcement, and since 2021 the murder rate has hit a historic high. But



Margain is undaunted. "If we fix public safety, we're going to be the best city in the world," he told me.

Joe Lonsdale, a venture capitalist who co-founded Palantir, the data-analysis company, and started the investment-technology firm 8VC, among many other enterprises, came to Austin from Silicon Valley. "I like Texas," he told me. "There's this spirit of the Texas frontier—strong people confronting challenges and doing so boldly." That's the myth I grew up with, but it still has the power to summon entrepreneurs like Lonsdale. He worries that Austin's rising cost of living disenfranchises the very people who made the city so distinct. "You want to have lots of hippies around because they make the music and the food better," he told me. "But you just don't want them in government."

After attending Stanford, Lonsdale became an intern at Peter Thiel's PayPal, and got to know three future billionaires now living in Austin: Luke Nosek, Ken Howery, and Elon Musk. (Musk has claimed to live in a forty-five-thousand-dollar tract house in Boca Chica Village, at the bottom tip of Texas, to be close to his rocket company's launch site, but he's also been seen staying in friends' mansions in Austin.) Called the "PayPal mafia," they have brought with them the disruptive self-image and libertarian politics that characterized their Silicon Valley ventures. Palantir, which is based in Denver but has offices in Austin, typifies the moral complexity of the current tech culture. The company has been criticized for allowing U.S. immigration authorities to use its sophisticated software to arrest parents of undocumented children, and for working with the N.S.A. to improve software that the agency used to spy on American citizens. But during the pandemic the government tracked outbreaks by analyzing COVID-19 data with Palantir software, and the company's algorithms are reportedly being used in Ukraine to monitor Russian troop deployments. David Ignatius, of the Washington *Post*, described Palantir's code as "the most advanced intelligence and battle-management software ever seen in combat."

One of Austin's assets, Lonsdale told me, is its location in the middle of the country, which obviates the need for cross-country flights. I asked him if the air connections in Austin were adequate for peripatetic business leaders. "Austin's a lot more connected than it used to be," he said. "The obnoxious reply would be that, of my twenty or thirty most prominent friends who moved here, they all have planes anyway."

As Lonsdale sees it, Austin also offers a middle ground in a political sense. He considers himself a "moderate person on the right" who opposed Donald Trump. His long list of campaign donations shows him contributing to both parties. He is prone to expressing irascible opinions, as when he tweeted, apropos of Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, that any man who takes a six-month paternity leave is a "loser." "I've always called myself socially liberal and fiscally conservative," he told me, but living in San Francisco radicalized him against "far left" politics. The city felt dangerous. Friends complained that their children were being indoctrinated in school about gender politics. "It got to be so wacky," he said. He had the sense that they were living in a "decadent society that's not working."

In Austin, he was struck by the fact that people who staunchly opposed his politics nevertheless discussed their differences with him in a civil manner. He told me, "In San Francisco, when I would go against someone, they'd be, like, 'You're an evil person.' So there's something still very healthy about Texas. I really hope we can keep it this way."

In 2018, Lonsdale founded the Cicero Institute, a think tank and lobbying organization that promotes deregulation. He is also the chair and principal backer of a new academic enterprise: the University of Austin, styled UATX. It is supposed to be a freewheeling intellectual environment, in contrast with what Lonsdale sees as the "nihilist, Marxist" bent of contemporary academia. Among its early supporters are the Islam critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the playwright David Mamet, and the journalist Bari Weiss. Such contrarians may feel less out of place in Austin, which has long navigated a tension between its progressive city government and the radical-right politics of the governor and the legislature.

I talked to the founding president of UATX, Pano Kanelos. A former head of St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, he is a burly, jovial man with a gray beard. His parents ran a restaurant in Chicago. He went to Northwestern, got a master's in political philosophy and literature from Boston University, a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, and a postdoc at Stanford. He's an academic through and through; he even has a perfectly egg-shaped head. But he believes that higher education in America has gone badly off track: it's crazily expensive and bloated with bureaucrats. Like Lonsdale, he thinks that liberal ideologues have squelched campus debate. The question is whether UATX will be freewheeling or merely oppositional.

I noted to Kanelos that Austin was already well stocked with colleges and universities. "I totally disagree," he said. "Every great city has a great public research institution and a great private research institution. As I've said to my friends at U.T., we want to be the Stanford to your Berkeley." He told me that UATX will welcome its first class in 2024. "The time is right for new institutions," he said. "If you're going to build a new university today, anywhere in the country, maybe in the world, it should be in Austin."

My neighborhood in Austin, Tarrytown, is named for the hamlet in upstate New York where Washington Irving set "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." When Roberta and I moved here, in 1995, many of the houses were one-story cottages inhabited by professors and state bureaucrats, amid a forest of cedar elms. Now there are billionaires. You don't know who your new neighbors are because the sellers sign nondisclosure agreements. I know what you're thinking, but Tarrytown isn't nearly as grand as River Oaks, in Houston, or Highland Park, in Dallas—street after street of Gatsbyesque mansions. There are more distinguished neighborhoods in Austin itself, but truly lavish properties are almost impossible to acquire in the city's fevered housing market.

The land that became Tarrytown was subdivided by the heirs of Governor Elisha Pease, who lived on an imposing estate, built in 1854, called Woodlawn. The house is eight thousand square feet, on four acres amply supplied with majestic live oaks. The property recently changed hands, but nobody seems to know who bought it. A white Rolls-Royce was seen trolling the block, fuelling a rumor that it was Beyoncé. The Austin *American-Statesman* uncovered hints that the purchaser was the rapper 50 Cent, who left New York for Houston because of taxes. "All of Silicon Valley is now in Austin," he declared in 2021. "I've got my cowboy hat."

A friend of mine, a real-estate developer, used to live about ten blocks from us, in a handsome Georgian home with an extra lot. Two years ago, the actress Emma Stone reportedly bought it. I walk by the property several times a week. It's being completely redone in a manner befitting a Hollywood star. I'm tickled to have her in the neighborhood, and yet I wonder what it is about Austin that drew her here.

Roberta and I got a preview of Austin's future when, in 1998, Matthew McConaughey moved into a two-bedroom bungalow across the street. He grew up in Texas, in Longview and Uvalde, and planned to attend Southern Methodist University, with the goal of practicing law in Dallas. His brother Pat asked, "Have you been to Austin? That's your kind of city! You can walk into a bar barefoot and have the sheriff to your right, a local Native American to your left, a hippie on the other side of the sheriff, and a lesbian on the other side of the Native American, and you'll probably be served by a dwarf with blue hair. They're all gonna be sharing a beer. And the only thing you have to do is be yourself." McConaughey went to U.T., earning a degree in film in 1993.

Five years later, he was a celebrity who could live anywhere, but he longed to return to his laid-back college town, which is where he'd got his first big break in movies, in Richard Linklater's "Dazed and Confused." By the time he showed up on our street, Austin was no longer the place McConaughey remembered. This was underscored when he got busted for playing bongos in the middle of the night with his windows open—for being "disorderly," a cop standing in my front yard told me, and on suspicion of possessing a small amount of narcotics. (McConaughey ultimately paid fifty bucks for violating a sound ordinance.) It didn't help his case that he wasn't wearing clothes at the time, but in Old Austin such behavior wouldn't even have been commented upon.

WALLACE STEVENS COMES BACK TO READ HIS POEMS AT THE 92ND STREET Y

It was a willfulness, an exertion, which verged
At once on fluency, that I should appear, as I did
Today, out of light-blue air, in a dark-blue suit.

In the time that I have been gone, I never outgrew
The sensation of being, nor for a moment forgot
Which world was mine. I clung to the merest whispers,

The faintest echoes that rose from below. For years,
I lay on a down-filled sofa, alone with my passions.
Bright refrains of endless azure circled

The hours, and filled me with pleasure, but the poems
I wrote were dulled by the sort of calm one feels
In the downward drift of sleep. They never became

The relics of light I wished them to be. In the days
When it could be said I was one of you, I loved
The beyond as somebody only can who is bound

By the earth. All that I wrote was a hymn to desire,
To the semblances and stages of bliss. My poems
Bore only a passing likeness to the life

Of which they were the miraculous part. But when
I was borne among the erasures of heaven I began
To believe that whatever was distant or puzzling could never

Be made too obvious. Of course I was wrong.
I'd allowed myself to be swayed by a vision of plainness
That would have all things turn into one idea.

So much for the past. May the worst of it fall by the wayside
Tonight. May other more intricate powers convene.
May the words that I speak be the ones you hear.

—*Mark Strand (1934-2014)*

Instead of leaving town, McConaughey appointed himself Austin's minister of culture, taking as his brief music, sports, youth development, and tourism, with the goal of preserving qualities that formed Austin's identity. He's now a sober family man who teaches a film course at U.T., titled Script to Screen. On game days, you'll see him at the football stadium, dressed in the orange-and-white team colors, working the sidelines as a motivational coach. He's been known to arrive at the stadium in a Lincoln adorned with a longhorn hood ornament, cruising past screaming fans while flashing a hook-'em-horns salute. He's become an important investor in Austin, participating in Eddie Margain's consortium that brought in the Major League Soccer team. McConaughey even helped design the university's new Moody Center, an arena that seats fifteen thousand people. It's a little unsettling to be living in a city that has been commandeered by a quirky actor who once starred in a "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" movie. Lately, he's been toying with running for political office. Who knows. I think of him as a mascot for New Austin, a modern incarnation of Oat Willie, guiding us onward through the fog.

I recently mentioned to McConaughey the disorientation I felt looking at the welter of skyscrapers outside the W hotel. "There's a lot of shadows in Austin now," he said. "If any town can keep a sense of style, keep its DNA, keep its soul, I believe Austin has the ability to do that, because it has an identity." But he worries that newcomers might exploit the city's guilelessness. "Austin will open up its Rolodex to you as a visitor or a newcomer quicker than any other place I've been," he said. "But we also have to be wise. You don't want to let a tyrant in your kitchen. So when we open up our Rolodex and say, 'Yes, come on in! Start that local business! Yes, take this real estate!,' we're gonna see how this turns out in ten years."

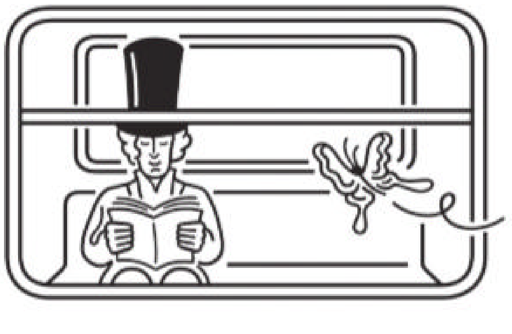
"Don't California my Texas" is a phrase that our governor, Greg Abbott, likes to toss around. He and California's governor, Gavin Newsom, have resumed an ideological war that first heated up during the reigns of their respective predecessors, Rick Perry and Jerry Brown. Perry had the gall to run radio ads in California urging companies to move to Texas—using the lack of a personal income tax as bait.

In September, Newsom attended the Texas Tribune Festival, in Austin. "I love Texas, O.K.?" he said. "None of this is personal. And I'm happy to take Austin back to California. Just sayin'." He recently bought billboard space in Austin, and in other cities whose state legislatures have passed highly restrictive abortion laws, to declare, "CALIFORNIA IS READY TO HELP." Despite hand-wringing in the Texas business community, the state's many right-wing social policies—book bans, reckless gun laws—haven't yet made a dent in the flow of migrants.

A tenth of Texas newcomers come from California. In the past few years, in the Austin area alone, they have brought along Tesla, Oracle, and other high-tech firms. The city's skyline is now defined by the sail-shaped Google building. Apple recently built a giant campus. Politically and culturally, this historic migration has consequences that we still haven't sorted out. The two states are on the opposite ends of the seesaw of national politics. In California, the Republican Party has collapsed. In Texas, Democrats haven't won a statewide election in twenty-eight years, and for the past two decades Republicans have had total control of the government. The consolidation of partisan power in both states has empowered ideologues on either side.

I assumed that the newcomers would tilt Texas blue. This was naïve. Many of them, such as Peter Attia, a doctor and podcaster, were Californians escaping what they considered to be bad schools and inept government services. He told me, "The only thing I find distressing about Austin is that it is taking a page out of the California playbook," with such city-council actions as the slashing of the police budget in 2020. "Those of us who came here from what I call a failed state are warning, 'Hey, guys, you don't want to do this. I'll show you what it looks like to have needles in your front yard, and what it feels like when you're uncomfortable leaving a restaurant.' That's why we left."

The net result of such migrations may make California bluer and Texas redder. The G.O.P. strategist Karl Rove—who, more than any other individual, helped turn Texas from being an all-blue state to its present all-redness—told me a 2022 poll of newly registered Texas voters found that fifty-nine per cent of them would vote Republican and forty-one per cent would vote Democratic. He offered a caveat where the future of Austin is concerned. The tech community first spilled over from Silicon Valley into Reno, Nevada, with the result that "Reno became younger and more vibrant and more liberal."



Many Californian imports identify more as libertarians than as progressives or conservatives, reinforcing Austin's live-and-let-live vibe. For as long as I've been here, Austin has considered itself a liberal bastion, in contrast with the conservative state it finds itself in. Though the city council remains progressive, the dominant tone of Austin today—social tolerance mixed with turbocharged capitalism—is closer to libertarianism than to liberalism.

Linda Avey, a founder of 23andMe, moved to Austin in 2021, from the Bay Area, having fallen for "the sentiment of keeping Austin weird." Avey, who is sixty-three, explained, "I'm just so held by that. Frankly, I think that's why San Francisco was so appealing to me back in the eighties." But the bohemian culture that drew her to San Francisco withered as the tech industry ran riot: "Artists and teachers and firefighters and all the people who are so necessary to the fabric of a community were no longer able to live there." San Francisco became characterized by the super-rich and the homeless, coupled with the stark absence of children—the fewest per capita of any city in the country.

Patrick McKenna grew up in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, raised by a single mother, who worked as a mail carrier. After attending the University of Southern California, on a scholarship, and getting a master's degree in international finance at Georgetown, he joined a small tech startup funded by Benchmark, a venture-capital firm in Menlo Park, California. Benchmark had offices on the legendary Sand Hill Road—the Wall Street of Silicon Valley. McKenna commuted from San Francisco, which wasn't really considered part of Silicon Valley at the time. The drive to Mountain View, San Jose, and Redwood City often exceeded ninety minutes, so Google and Facebook and several venture-capital firms opened large offices in the city. McKenna recalled, "It was really the workforce that dragged tech to San Francisco. And the city wasn't ready for it."

The tech sector boosted tax revenues in San Francisco, but the boom was marked by enormous income disparities. Locals weren't seeing the benefits. "People's lives were getting more expensive, but their kids weren't getting invited to join an internship, or their school wasn't being sponsored for a tech-entrepreneur program," McKenna said. "We were so busy building our companies, we weren't thinking about the local high school." McKenna blames San Francisco's government for not investing enough of the tax-revenue bonanza in schools and infrastructure. "In the end," as he sees it, "entrepreneurs like myself were vilified."

McKenna decided to try his luck in a different city. As Bob Inman had done with M.C.C., McKenna developed a list of criteria. At the top was talent. The tech industry is rapacious in its need for skilled workers. High-quality colleges and universities were essential, not only in feeding the talent pool but also in adding vibrancy to the culture. Quality of life wasn't just about the cost of living; it was art, music, public spaces, architecture, bike lanes. McKenna was also looking for a "trust network." The tech industry, he explained, relies on credentials. One way in the door is to work for a Silicon Valley titan like Google or eBay. "We know they have great training programs," he said. "We know how they build their code." Another way in is to get an engineering degree from an illustrious school such as Stanford or M.I.T. Then there's the venture-capital community. McKenna told me, "If you worked at a startup that was funded by Sequoia Capital or Kleiner Perkins, and even if that startup fails, you're part of the trust network."

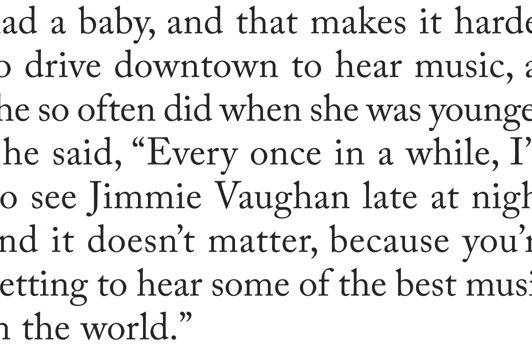
In Austin, he realized, "you have so many nodes of the trust network." He said, "Kids coming out of U.T. can enter the trust network through a job at Google, Meta, Oracle, Amazon, or Apple—you can work for all these companies right here."

McKenna's view is that "San Francisco failed through success." He worries that Austin, newly drenched in venture capital, will make similar mistakes: "If Austin stops being affordable for those who make it an interesting place, it will stop being an interesting place."

Emily Gimble moved out of Austin in 2016. She is a part of Texas music royalty; her grandfather Johnny Gimble played fiddle with Bob Wills, who is considered a founder of Western swing. Years ago, I had the opportunity to play with Johnny, one of those luminous moments which music offers. Emily's dad, Dick Gimble, played bass with Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson, among others. Emily, a gifted piano player and singer, was named the State Musician of Texas in 2020. She's the kind of person Austin can't afford to lose.

Property taxes and rents helped push her out of town. But there was another irritant: Austin had become too loud. Gimble said, "When you're on the road, you're in a bus and it hums, or you're on an airplane and it hums, and it hums at sound check—there's always noise. I don't know if it's a musician thing or a human thing, but whenever I get home I just want to not *hear* anything." So she moved to Lockhart, a little town famous for barbecue. It's about half an hour south of Austin, and quiet—the way Austin used to be. Gimble recently had a baby, and that makes it harder to drive downtown to hear music, as she so often did when she was younger. She said, "Every once in a while, I'll go see Jimmie Vaughan late at night and it doesn't matter, because you're getting to hear some of the best music in the world."

Gimble is part of a larger artistic diaspora that Austin is experiencing. No doubt, surrounding communities are being fertilized by the talent leaking out. Gimble has observed a small music community and art galleries springing up in Lockhart, though the town's character hasn't significantly changed—yet. Not long ago, she stopped at a coffee shop. "There was a sticker on the refrigerator: 'DON'T AUSTIN MY LOCKHART,'" she said. "And I was, like, 'That's so ridiculous.' Then, by the time I left, I was saying, 'Yeah, it's *my* Lockhart.'"



"I spent my entire life trying to build up the reputation of Austin so that we could have access to more quality entertainment at an affordable price," Eddie Wilson, the entrepreneur who created the Armadillo World Headquarters—the venue that consolidated the Austin music scene in the nineteen-seventies—told me. "Now I can't afford a bus downtown."

It's strange to live in a town without Wilson's fingerprints on it. Not only is the Armadillo gone; the Raw Deal, which he also founded, is long since out of business. His beloved restaurant, Threadgill's, has closed—another victim of the pandemic. In a previous existence, it was a gas station and roadhouse owned by Kenneth Threadgill, who held the weekly musical jams that first brought a U.T. student named Janis Joplin to public attention.

The music scene arose in Austin because it was youthful and cheap. (Wilson initially paid five hundred bucks a month to rent the enormous former National Guard armory that housed the Armadillo.) Artifacts of Wilson's Austin are on display in his home office: an Autoharp like the one Joplin used to play; a Gilbert Shelton sketch of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers; Jim Franklin's memorable music posters, adorned with images of the nine-banded armadillo, which Wilson calls an "icon of hippiedom." Every name in this paragraph was a cultural landmark in the Austin of the seventies and eighties; now perhaps only Joplin's resonates, and even then her association with Austin is a dim memory. "Growth is weird," Wilson said, combining New Austin and Old Austin into a single succinct equation.

While Wilson was establishing a home for the Austin music scene, Louis Black set out "to find America." Black grew up in New Jersey, lived in New England, then moved to South Carolina and Florida before arriving in Austin, in 1974. "I fell in love," he said. He enrolled at U.T., taking graduate courses in English, "which I hated," so he switched to film. He was restless. Like other shape-shifters in Austin's history, he had a yen to create something, but he wasn't sure what it should be.

In 1981, Black and his friend Nick Barbaro started the Austin *Chronicle*, a progressive tabloid modelled on the *Village Voice*. "We thought it'd be easy," Black recalled. "It was horrible at first—we didn't have enough money." From the start, the *Chronicle* spotlighted local music, becoming an essential guide to the players and the clubs in the city. The paper eventually caught on, and that led

"Brother Trent brews the hard seltzer."

• •

to an even bigger venture. In 1987, Black and Barbaro, along with the *Chronicle* staffer Roland Swenson and the band manager Louis Jay Meyers, started South by Southwest, as a meeting place for musicians and people in the industry. "Guys that had been in the music business for fifteen years would have never met a record-company executive," Black observed. The founders were hoping that three hundred people would show up. Twice that many came. "We didn't know what we were doing," Black said, but it was clear that SXSW, as it became known, answered a need: "It was about the punk ethos—there's no difference between who's in the audience and who's onstage but a foot and a half."

SXSW has lost that intimate feel. It now has the placeless vibe of a TED-talk conference. This is in part because SXSW expanded well beyond music. In 1994, it added film and interactive media, bringing in the tech community. The festival grew so fast that the organizers lied in order to downplay how big it was becoming, unable to believe it themselves. Then, in 2007, Twitter held a major launch event at SXSW. As Black put it, "Suddenly, everybody began saying, 'We'll meet you in Austin.'"

I asked Black how Austin has changed. "There was a significant community here that had a vision about what a city should be," he said. Austin would be creative, coöperative, noncompetitive, green, and politically plugged in. "We succeeded. And we made this really wonderful place that everybody came to, which then wrecked the core idea."

Before we settled in Austin, my wife and I had a brief stint here in the early seventies, while she finished a master's degree. I worked at the local PBS station as a carpenter and a grip, moving heavy lights around Studio 6A atop a tall ladder on wheels. I don't much like heights, and my confidence was not boosted by what looked like bloodstains on the concrete floor. Two years later, Studio 6A became the original home of "Austin City Limits." Willie Nelson performed for the pilot, and after that the nation began thinking of our city as a musical epicenter. The program has spotlighted Stevie Ray Vaughan, Doug Sahm, Roy Orbison, Lyle Lovett, Asleep at the Wheel, and countless other great performers. To draw a crowd in those early days, the show offered free beer. Laura Bush was one of the servers. (This was before she married George.) Now "A.C.L." is the longest-running music program in television history, with a bespoke concert venue seating nearly three thousand people.

"Back in the day, it was a country-music-inspired showcase," Terry Lickona, the show's longtime producer, told me. "The idea was to re-create the Armadillo vibe." For a long time, progressive country music dominated the show. "Then we went through a period, ten or fifteen years ago, where we were trying to figure out who we were and what kind of music we wanted to play. We eventually came to the point where our overriding philosophy is 'Anything goes.' . . . If it's a good live show, then, yeah, bring it on."

Lickona came to Austin in 1974 from Poughkeepsie, New York, to attend Willie Nelson's annual Fourth of July Picnic, just as "A.C.L." was getting off the ground. He has watched the music scene move from clubs and coffee houses to stadiums and ball fields, dominated by national acts rather than by homegrown musicians. It's difficult to defend the motto that Austin is the "live-music capital of the world" when so many small venues have shut down. Lickona noted, "It's always been a part of our mission to continue to showcase Austin music. Every year, there are at least three or four Austin artists that we consider ready and deserving, whether it's somebody like Black Pumas or Gary Clark, Jr., or Marcia Ball. It would be a really sad day if people just stop caring about getting out to see a show."

Just when I was feeling discouraged about Austin's music scene, I talked to Henri Herbert, a blazing young piano player from England, who grew up imitating the licks of Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. Then he learned about the boogie-woogie masters in Austin, such as my teacher, Floyd Domino, and Marcia Ball. "We used to play her songs in one of my bands," Herbert told me. He performed at SXSW in 2016: "I met all the great players and saw the music that *lives* here." He'd tried his luck in London and Paris, but he had to supplement his income by washing dishes. He wanted to be somewhere where he could play every day.

He settled in Austin in 2019. It was exciting and terrifying. "I only had my keyboard and a backpack," he said. That year, he was nominated for Best Keyboards at the Austin Music Awards, alongside some of his heroes. "Something told me that I could show up here, not trying to take things but to *give* things, and I would become a part of this beautiful community."

Gina Chavez is more ambivalent. Born in Austin, she has toured the world as a musician, but she's never found a place in the city's musical culture. She calls Austin "a city of legends," Willie Nelson and Stevie Ray Vaughan among them. But their music didn't really resonate with her. "There's a phrase in Spanish—*Nunca me llamó la atención.* 'It never captured my attention.'"

The music Chavez plays—Latin, percussive, bilingual, sometimes political, always groovy—would probably fare better in Miami, or even in San Antonio, just down the highway. It wasn't until she played an NPR Tiny Desk concert that Austin tastemakers seemed to notice her. "If I had the ability to rewind twenty years, I would have preferred somebody looked me in the eye and said, 'Gina, your tribe may not be here.'" When she considers the artists who have successfully broken out of the Austin scene, she asks herself, "Are any of them females? Are any of them queer?" She told me, "We have a lot of talent here who break barriers. But do we have the ears to hear them?"

In 2020, a twelve-foot mural of Gina appeared on East Cesar Chavez Street. The artist, Levi Ponce, invited her to take a look. "I was in shock," she said. "It was right after the world had shut down, so it was one of the only times I went out. Pretty wild."

"Austin is an incredible place with a lot of wonderful attributes, but it's also a frightening place," Tam Hawkins, the head of the local Black Chamber of Commerce, told me. "We have such income disparities—that's the frightening part." In the past decade, the proportion of Black residents in Austin has declined, from eight per cent to seven per cent, whereas the Asian proportion has grown. The percentage of Latino residents has also dropped, from thirty-five per cent to thirty-three per cent.

Austin's original sin was the 1928 Master Plan, which pushed Black and Latino residents into neighborhoods on the east side. The city withheld sewer systems and paved roads from the freedmen communities on the west side, with enduring consequences. "We did a project called Taste of Black Austin, about the history of Black food entrepreneurs," Hawkins said. "We discovered that there were more Black-owned restaurants here in 1863 than there were in 2018."

Because of gentrification, East Austin is now a melting pot—a place of art studios and food trucks where people of all backgrounds wait in line for beet-tartare tostadas. At the same time, much of the character of the east side has been sacrificed. A defining moment in this cultural turf battle occurred in 2015, when a piñata shop was unceremoniously bulldozed by its landlord and replaced by a short-lived café for cat-lovers. Some lively local traditions—like weekend gatherings at Fiesta Gardens with customized lowriders and jacked-up trucks—have drawn complaints from newcomers who resent the Tejano music and hip-hop blaring from stereos.

Hawkins told me that she herself is one of five remaining Black owners of commercial property in East Austin. "There's nothing sinister about the desire to buy, develop, and earn income," she said. "What's sinister is that certain ethnicities aren't part of that process." Hawkins understands the logic that pushes people to the suburbs: "Why would I spend $1.6 million on a two-thousand-square-foot house when I could go, let's say, to Leander and pay nine hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars for a four-thousand-square-foot house and send my kids to public school as opposed to a private one?" In her opinion, better, swifter transportation to and from the suburbs—thus relieving market pressure in the city—would go a long way toward solving Austin's housing crisis.

Peniel Joseph, a Black historian at U.T., told me, "The city doesn't really own up to its history of racial segregation." The only realms where races converge, Joseph said, are sports and music. Otherwise, "things *really* diverge in terms of resources and access to education." He commended U.T. for developing various equity initiatives, especially a campaign called You Belong Here, which is meant to attract and retain faculty and students of color. But, he said, "you need resources if you're thinking about how to bend the wealth gap, the education gap, and the residential-segregation gap." He continued, "How do you impact things like voter suppression or differential treatment in the criminal-justice system?"

Tech workers have changed the racial character of the city, Joseph said. "If we just had a demographically proportional number of Black folks moving here, you would find there's a Black Austin that has a robust upper middle class—tech leaders, entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, professors," he said. "But those folks are staying in Houston."

I observed, "And the biggest growth factor in Austin is an industry that is famously white and Asian."

"That's a recipe for Black cultural disaster," Joseph said.

The east-west divide in Austin was on stark display during last year's mayoral race. Kirk Watson is a white liberal Democrat who served as mayor from 1997 to 2001, then spent thirteen years in the State Senate. Watson's opponent was Celia Israel, who has called herself a "left-handed liberal lesbian Latina." She served in the State House from 2014 to 2023, where she was a founding member of the L.G.B.T.Q. caucus and a banner-carrier for the Democrats' left flank. The candidates' platforms were similar, but their identities were not. West Austin was solidly for Watson, who picked up independents and conservatives. East Austin was just as solidly progressive. Only nine hundred and forty-two votes carried Watson over the top. The difference in their supporters was not so much ethnic as generational.

Watson told me that many of the problems Austin now faces were already evident in his first term as mayor—he cited transportation and affordable housing. What has changed is the scale. "We're now a big city," he said. "And we have to act like it."

I took a tour of the west side of Austin with Laura Gottesman, a real-estate agent. "I've worked with a lot of people from other cities that aren't used to doing business our way," she told me, adding, "In Austin, your word is your bond. A handshake is the real deal. It's a small town in the sense we all know each other, our paths will cross, and you don't burn bridges.”

We drove around Clarksville, one of the freedmen communities that was depleted by the Master Plan and is now almost entirely white. When Roberta and I first moved to Austin, Clarksville was a hippie enclave, but it has long since moved on from patchouli and tie-dyed T-shirts. “The price per foot in this neighborhood is outrageous,” Gottesman remarked.

John Mackey used to live in Clarksville. Emerging from the counterculture of the seventies, he was a vegetarian with long hair and a beard who viewed corporations as evil. In 1978, he and his girlfriend, Renee Lawson, started a little natural-foods store, Safer Way, that refused to stock meat, seafood, coffee, and anything containing highly refined sugars. It was a bust. Two years later, he merged with another natural-foods store in Clarksville, creating the first Whole Foods Market. This time, he was less doctrinaire about what he wouldn't sell.

Then came the Memorial Day Flood of 1981. Anyone who was in Austin that day will tell you stories. We were on high ground in Travis Heights, but the rain was so relentless that it caved in part of our roof, which dumped onto our piano. Eleven inches fell in three hours. Thirteen people died. Whole Foods was at the bottom of a hill on North Lamar Boulevard. Back then, car dealerships lined the street, and when the downpour subsided locals were left with the dazzling sight of Volkswagens and Subarus tangled up in trees. Whole Foods, which had no flood insurance, was eight feet underwater.

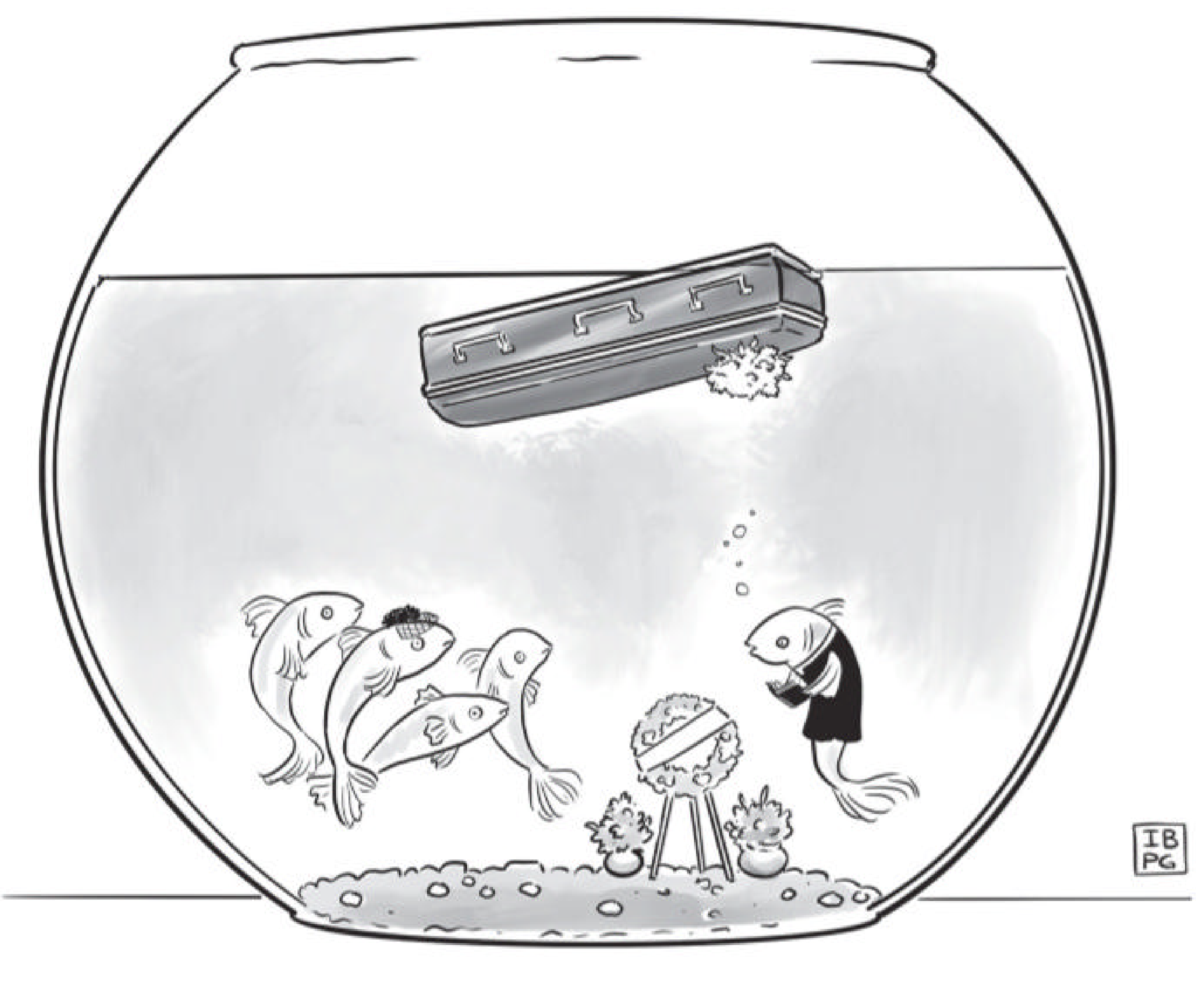
That would've been the end of the story were it not for the customers and the neighbors who showed up with mops and rags, cleaning out the destroyed inventory. This went on for weeks. The staff worked for free. Suppliers produced goods on credit. A month later, Whole Foods reopened. Mackey realized that his business would never have survived if it hadn't found a place in the hearts of the community. It's a well-known parable in Austin, but it also marks a transition from the counterculture to what Mackey calls “conscious capitalism”—a system in which, as he sees it, heroic entrepreneurs (like him) enhance everyone's quality of life with their imagination, creativity, and passion.

Many of the well-off newcomers to Austin share this philosophy. “I struggle with entitlement,” Gottesman said. “I struggle with people who come here wanting to write their own rules. In Austin, nobody really cares who you are—but you'll be respected if you contribute.”

If you live long enough in a place, it becomes haunted by ghosts: memories of events and friends long gone still inhabit spaces that have been levelled and covered over by the unstoppable newness. It's a form of double vision: you see things that are no longer there. That was on my mind as we drove a few blocks south, to Baylor Street, where a handful of mansions built by the old aristocracy—places where Black servants from Clarksville would have worked—have been handsomely renovated. The late Bill Wittliff, who was a dear friend, used to have an office in an old house on Baylor Street. Best known as the screenwriter for “The Perfect Storm” and the television adaptation of “Lonesome Dove,” he was a giant in the filmmaking scene in Austin and a mentor to young directors and screenwriters. His office was where a struggling writer named William Sydney Porter was said to have once lived. Porter had a day job as a teller at the First National Bank, and in 1894 he was accused of embezzling $854.08, which led to a five-year prison sentence. Behind bars, he decided to take the pen name O. Henry, and wrote some of the most enduring short stories in the American canon.

Speaking of ghosts, I recently went by a medical clinic on Cameron Road and instantly realized that I'd been there before. It had long ago been one of Old Austin's weirder redoubts: the headquarters of American Atheists, founded by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who leaped to fame as a plaintiff in the 1963 Supreme Court case that ended mandatory prayer and Bible reading in public schools. *Life* called her “the most hated woman in America,” a title she relished. She spoke on college campuses and appeared on Johnny Carson's “Tonight Show.” She turned over bingo tables in a church and sued the Pope. She claimed to have “an alphabet of degrees—B.A., M.A., LL.B., M.P.S.W., Ph.D., J.D.” She was loud and arrogant and pompous, and almost single-handedly gave atheism a worse name than it already had.

In 1989, I wrote about O'Hair for *Texas Monthly*. When I arrived at the headquarters for our first interview, I was told, “Madalyn is napping. Would you like to take a look?” My guide led me to O'Hair's office. Through a window, half a dozen admirers were watching the “first lady



of atheism" sleeping on a couch, in a flower-print dress. "It's a little like Lenin's tomb," my guide said, echoing my thoughts. O'Hair awakened, entirely unperturbed by the audience, and launched into a tirade about the government's monopolistic control of information through the post office.

By the time I wrote about O'Hair, her public life had narrowed to a weekly show on Austin's public-access channel, put together by her son and her granddaughter. Atheism was a family business. When I dropped in on a taping, she glowered and said, "You're really *dogging* us, aren't you?" She got even angrier as I dug into her background, exposing the manifold lies she'd told about her degrees and accomplishments.

After the article appeared, there was a knock on our door. A constable handed me a document that said, "YOU HAVE BEEN SUED." It was already on the news. Friends were calling. They were annoyingly giddy. A Jungian scholar congratulated me, saying that O'Hair was an eruption of my unconscious. The local newspaper called it a libel suit, but the actual claim was that I'd used O'Hair's "famousness" without permission—an odd line of attack for a champion of free speech. She never followed up, and the case was dropped from the docket. In 1995, O'Hair, her son, and her granddaughter disappeared, and several hundred thousand dollars were withdrawn from one of the organization's accounts. Five years later, their dismembered bodies were discovered in a shallow grave on a ranch in South Texas. (I had nothing to do with it.)

Austin public-access TV also provided an early forum for the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, who one time carved a jack-o'-lantern on air while ranting about Austin police officers using infrared cameras. Listening to Jones is like hearing Tony Soprano recite "Finnegans Wake" on amphetamines. When Linklater made "Waking Life," he cast Jones as a raving madman driving around town with a P.A. system—an unintentional foreshadowing of what was to come. Back then, Jones seemed like another harmless Austin crank with a colorful ability to invent conspiracies on the fly—"this hyper guy that we'd all kind of make fun of," Linklater has recalled.

I once spoke about Jones with the podcaster Joe Rogan—yet another Californian import. In 2020, he moved to Austin from Los Angeles, buying a lakeside estate. The following year, he invited me on his show. Rogan is five feet eight, but his shoulders are about as wide as he is high. He's dauntingly muscular and tattooed, but despite his formidable physical presentation he's friendly and amusing. The experience of being on his podcast is like having a curious fellow pull up a barstool next to you; three hours later, you've unloaded your life story.

Before the interview, we got our nostrils swabbed for a mandatory COVID test—which was interesting, given that Rogan had been strongly criticized for giving air time to vaccine skeptics. I mentioned that I had watched an interview he'd done with Alex Jones.

"What'd you think of him?" he asked.

"I think he's a sociopath."

"He's not," Rogan said. "He's a head-injury case. I was a cage fighter. I've known a lot of guys with head injuries." He had asked Jones if he'd ever had a serious concussion. Jones had replied, "I've been piledrived," meaning that he was turned upside down and his head was pounded into the concrete. He was thirteen or fourteen years old. Rogan had pressed him about how that might have changed his personality, but Jones was evasive. Jones did say, "I had brain damage—there's no doubt."

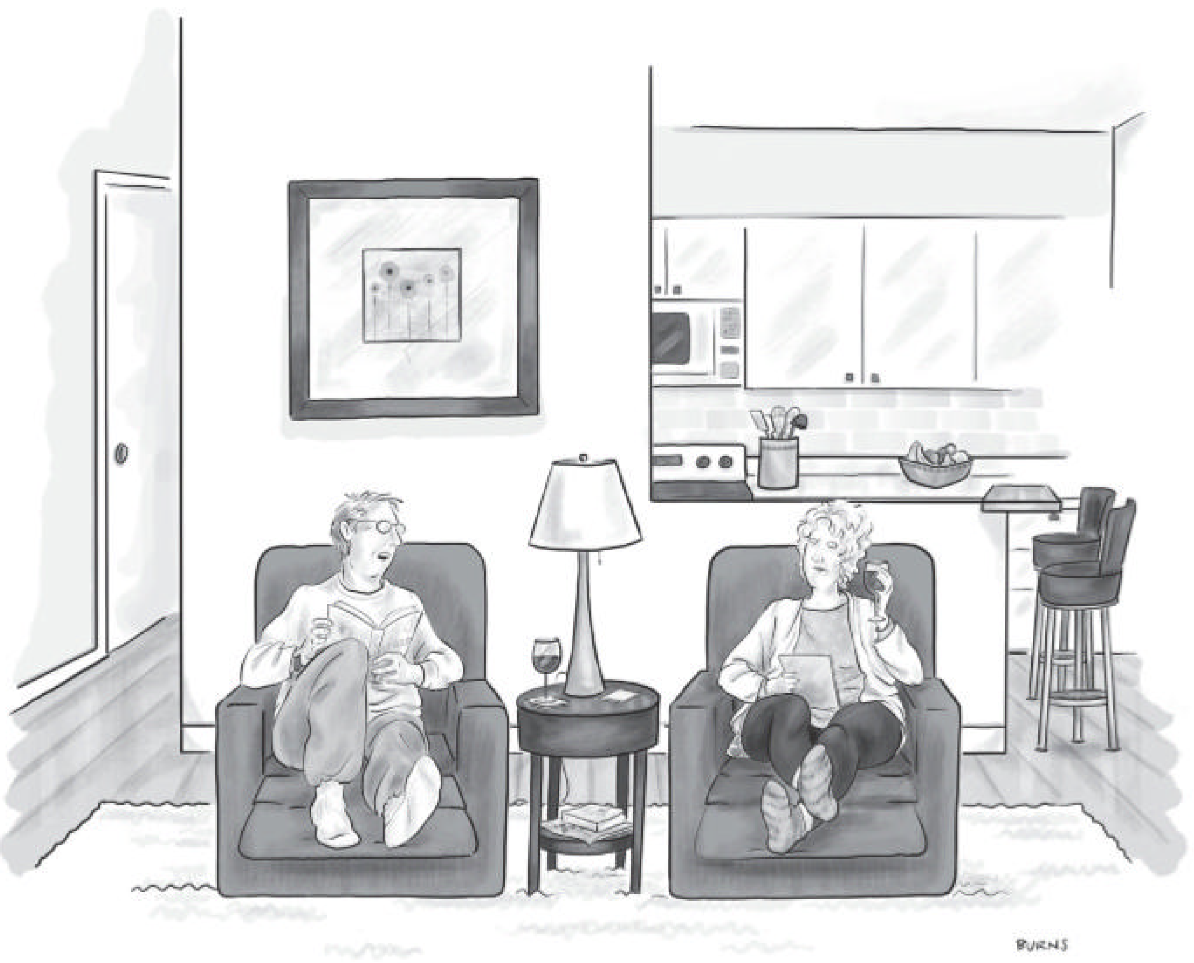
Is Jones's story true, or yet another thing that he has confabulated in his strange mind? I met him at a party fifteen years ago. I had never heard of him. My book about 9/11, "The Looming Tower," had recently come out, and Jones wanted to offer his own theories about how it was a setup job. He backed off when it was apparent that I knew considerably more about the tragedy than he did, but after that conspiracists who called themselves 9/11 Truthers began showing up at my speeches, trying to get me to admit that the government was in on the attack. They even insinuated that I was a part of the conspiracy. Much of their dogma issued directly from Alex Jones's damaged imagination.

Everywhere in town, you see new apartments and condos and houses under construction, but Austin can't keep pace with the boom. The university has been buying up properties for subsidized faculty housing, as N.Y.U. does in Manhattan, because professors have been priced out of the market. Students, meanwhile, have been stranded by rent hikes and a scarcity of campus housing. The pressure goes all the way down to tract homes at the bottom of the market. People who can't afford to live anywhere in Austin either leave or wind up on the street.

In 2019, the staunchly progressive city council decided to "decriminalize homelessness" by lifting a ban on public camping. The plan's architect, Councilman Greg Casar, a Democrat who had spearheaded the defunding of the police—and who is now a thirty-three-year-old congressman representing the east side—was accused by opponents of trying to make homelessness "more visible" in order to advance the cause of free housing. Immediately, tent cities popped up under freeways and in public parks.

I like to run around Lady Bird Lake, and its shoreline became clogged with tents and tarps and cardboard shanties. Admittedly, it was an ideal campsite, but runners reported being attacked by people perceived to be mentally unstable. In 2020, the city cut back on the park patrol, and huge piles of trash accumulated along the shore and spilled into the lake.

Austinites were shocked and conflicted. A bipartisan PAC, Save Austin Now, got a measure on the ballot to reinstitute the camping ban. It passed, by a landslide. But the question remained: Where should the homeless go? It was an agonizing dilemma, especially after the pandemic had taken hold. Governor Abbott ordered the Department of Transportation to clean out the encampments below overpasses, but that only brought more tents and cardboard shelters into parks and onto sidewalks. Defiant campers pitched tents around City Hall. Mackenzie Kelly, a council member, tweeted, “I’ve been harassed and screamed at with obscenities walking out of city hall. One of the men had a metal pipe and at least one knife. I do not feel safe.” Eventually, police began enforcing the ban, and the campers moved back into the parkland woods and the undeveloped tracts where they had once lived. But the homeless problem lingered, along with a lot of ill will. Austin had been thrust into the same political battle that has been fought for decades in San Francisco, without meaningful solutions. In Austin, the issue stirred to life a conservative constituency that few realized was present in the city.



“Trying to retrieve words we can’t think of is really the bond that holds us together, isn’t it?”

I recalled a protest held in 1988, when the city tried to enforce the camping ban. A group of homeless men “kidnapped” a gosling named Homer (actually, they’d bought him at a country store, for sixteen dollars and eighty-seven cents) and threatened to eat him if the city didn’t propose various reforms, including affordable-housing measures. Roger Swanner, one of the goosenappers, told the Austin *American-Statesman*, “We just want the people of this city to realize that we’re human beings and should be treated that way.” To keep Homer out of police custody, they launched a Styrofoam barge into the lake, complete with a makeshift cabin. It reminded me of Huck Finn and Jim floating down the Mississippi. Homer the Goose became a celebrity. He got to meet Willie Nelson. He led parades down Congress Avenue. He was detained during a housing protest. The city council ultimately agreed to meet with the homeless delegation, to little effect. In 2004, a handsome shelter opened downtown, but it had about a hundred beds—far fewer than needed. Homer ended his days in an animal sanctuary, but he succeeded in making homelessness an issue in a characteristically Austin fashion. The politics of the city weren’t as brutal then, but they were just as feckless where homelessness was concerned.

Texas was the first state to pass a law, based on a model bill issued by Joe Lonsdale’s Cicero Institute, that makes camping in public places a Class C misdemeanor, punishable by a five-hundred-dollar fine, and prohibits state funds from going to any city that doesn’t enforce the ban. It’s designed to keep homeless people out of public view.

In 1998, Alan Graham, a former real-estate developer, took aim at the problem, as an act of Christian charity. Two years earlier, he had been on a Catholic men’s retreat and was inspired to create Mobile Loaves & Fishes, which delivered food to homeless Austinites. Then, in 2014, he built Community First! Village, in eastern Travis County. The development currently provides housing for four hundred people. An official head count in 2021 found nearly thirty-two hundred Austinites experiencing homelessness, including people living in shelters. A more recent head count in San Francisco, a smaller city, tallied nearly eight thousand—the great majority unsheltered.

Graham took me around Community First! Village in a golf cart. “We focus exclusively on chronic homelessness,” he told me. To qualify for residence, a person must have been on the street for at least a year; the average time is ten years. Residents live in manufactured housing, R.V.s, or micro-homes—one-bedroom houses without kitchens or bathrooms. (Communal facilities are provided.) Graham’s creation has evolved into one of the most consequential social innovations in the country. He and his wife live in the middle of the village, in a manufactured house with an attached porch and some treasured junk out front: an old Coca-Cola sign, a rusted wagon wheel, the rim of a hubcap from a Stutz Bearcat.

Graham, who is sixty-seven, has a ruddy face, glasses, a sideways grin, and a glistening white beard. He wears a silver San Damiano cross, which he bought on a pilgrimage to Assisi, and a blue gimme cap advertising GOODNESS. He studied physics at U.T. before dropping out to become a real-estate developer and a “serial entrepreneur.” He saw his business crushed by the 1986 oil bust, which pummelled real estate in Texas.

Graham handed me a sketch that he’d made bearing the legend “Homelessness exists at the intersection of many broken systems and layers of trauma.” These include foster care, mental-health issues, substance abuse, and criminal justice, but the main route—“the interstate highway of homelessness,” Graham explained—is a “catastrophic loss of family.” Community First! Village aims to replace those broken family ties with a caring social structure.

We drove past a greenhouse where, Graham explained, plants are fertilized by “fish poop” from an adjoining aquarium. An outdoor garden had a pavilion in the center. “That was built to house an eight-hundred-and-fifty-pound pumpkin we will grow next year,” he said. “We’re trying to create the greatest show on earth here!” An amphitheatre, built with funds donated by the Alamo Drafthouse—a cinema chain founded in Austin—is used for movies, talent shows, and karaoke.

Graham has a gift for recruiting Austinites to assist with his effort. The micro-houses, for example, were designed and built by local architects and contractors. The land was donated by benefactors. The development today occupies fifty-one acres, but it will have tripled in size by the end of 2023: it plans to add enough houses to shelter fourteen hundred more people, allowing it to accommodate nearly two-thirds of Austin’s chronically homeless population. This is the result of a single individual’s imagination and persistence, along with the support of citizens who see the effort making a difference. “We launched a hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar capital campaign,” Graham said. “We’ve already raised a hundred and thirty-six.”

Residents pay rent, an average of three hundred dollars a month. Graham noted that “seventy to eighty per cent are receiving some form of government assistance”—Social Security, disability, retirement income, veterans’ benefits—and that paying jobs in the village are available, including gardening, housekeeping, and janitorial services. He took me into an “entrepreneur hub,” where several residents were assembling jewelry designed by Kendra Scott, an Austin businesswoman listed by *Forbes* as one of the richest women in America. The community recently developed its own line of jewelry for an Austin hotel.

“We have a number of drug addicts and alcoholics,” Graham said. He doesn’t try to reform them, though he does keep an eye out for people trying to “game the system” by, say, stealing or hustling drugs. Nearly everyone has mental or physical problems. “The average age here is fifty-six, and the average age of death is fifty-nine,” Graham said. “We had a fellow die this morning.” One of the most meaningful amenities that Community First! Village provides is a memorial garden, where the ashes of those who have passed are placed in a burial column, with their names inscribed in granite. A great fear among many who live on the street is that they will die anonymously, unmissed and unmourned. Nearly three hundred people died on the streets of Austin in 2022.

“Mommy and Daddy were just wrestling.”

“The concept around Community First! is that, if you want to mitigate this pandemic of homelessness, the whole community is going to have to get involved,” Graham said. “The government should only play a subsidiary role. We have abdicated that responsibility almost entirely to the government, and that’s a failed model.”

In 1876, the state’s founders set aside a tract of land in West Texas, which eventually swelled to a couple of million acres, to support a university system. That’s not as high-minded as it seems; the land was deemed so worthless that nobody bothered to survey it. Along came an oilman named Frank T. Pickrell, who, in the early nineteen-twenties, decided to drill a well on that land. At the time, the oil play was all on the east side of the state. Pickrell chose the site not because of a geologist’s report but because it was close to the railroad. He went to New York to reassure investors, including a group of Catholic women who had taken the plunge. They handed Pickrell a red rose that had been blessed by a priest, and directed him to climb the derrick and scatter the petals while christening the well Santa Rita, for the patron saint of impossible causes. He did as they suggested. The well tapped into the Permian Basin, the largest oil field in American history. “That changed everything,” J. B. Milliken, the chancellor of the U.T. system, told me. The system now has the nation’s largest public-university endowment—sixty-six billion dollars. The Santa Rita No. 1 rig sits on the edge of the Austin campus, near the football stadium.

Milliken likes to quote the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s recipe for building a great city: “Create a great university and wait two hundred years.” The tech industry originated in the Bay Area and Boston in large part because of great private universities such as Stanford, M.I.T., and Harvard. U.T. has a different mandate. “Public universities exist to serve the people of the state, so they tend to be more outwardly facing and more integrated into every part of the community,” Milliken told me. “U.T.-Austin has a strategic plan to be the most impactful university in the world.”

Michael Dell echoed this. "If you find great companies, I guarantee you there's a great university nearby," he said. I observed that this came from a man who had dropped out of U.T. after two semesters. "You're absolutely correct," he conceded. "But that doesn't mean that it doesn't graduate a lot of talented people. And they're the required ingredient for success." Dell, who is fifty-seven, has the unfurrowed brow and ready smile of a man who sees a clear road ahead. The Bloomberg Billionaires Index ranks him as the world's twenty-fifth-richest man. His parents had wanted him to be a doctor; instead, in Austin, he helped fund the Dell Children's Medical Center, the Dell Pediatric Research Institute, and the Dell Medical School.

I asked him if he had intended to stay in Austin when he dropped out of school. "I never for a nanosecond thought about going somewhere else," he said, though he wasn't exactly a perfect fit with the city back then. "I used to ride my bike to Whole Foods," he said. That was about as far as he went with the Austin counterculture. "I wasn't smoking joints down in Hippie Hollow," a clothing-optional lakeside park. "I was a"—he traced a square in the air.

I expressed concern about the rate of growth that is propelling the city into God knows what. Dell reminded me that, in each of the four decades he's lived in Austin, the city has seen exponential growth. He was fine with that. "I tend to be more of a pro-change guy," he said. "It's what we do in the tech world." He grinned. "If you're not comfortable with that, you're gonna have a *really* hard time."

Elon Musk has made Austin the centerpiece of his new Texas empire. In addition to the Gigafactory Texas—said to be the second-largest building in the world by volume, after the Boeing Everett Factory, in Washington State—Musk's other businesses in and around Austin include the tunnel-drilling Boring Company; Neuralink, which is working on a computer-brain interface; and SpaceX, which is seeking to colonize Mars. These are huge additions to the Austin-area economy.

I had been worried about the weirdness-eradicating influence of wealth and technology on Austin, but as I learned more about Musk's presence in the city I realized that weirdness has actually taken a giant step forward. Musk has nine living children (one died in infancy), and a real-estate agent told me that he has been relocating them to Austin. (When Musk was e-mailed about this, and about living with a friend in town, he replied with two crying-laughing emojis.) In 2018, Musk and the Canadian songwriter Grimes, whose music was described in this magazine, by my colleague Kelefa Sanneh, as "irreducibly weird but insistently pop," began dating. They had a boy, X Æ A-12, and a daughter, Exa Dark Sideræl. Shortly after their daughter was born, Grimes tweeted that she and Musk had broken up. She then reportedly became entangled with another new Austinite, Chelsea Manning, the whistle-blower and trans activist freshly free from serving seven years in military prison. The relationship is said to have ended within months. Grimes pleaded with her "fellow Texans" to sign a petition to ease building regulations in order to keep Austin from becoming another San Francisco. She tweeted, "I couldn't afford to buy a house that fits my kids in Austin (at the moment) without help from their dad which is INSANE."

On Thanksgiving weekend last year, I rode out to the Circuit of the Americas, Austin's decade-old Formula 1 track, to meet two crypto bros who'd come up with a genius idea to call attention to their enterprise. They commissioned a gigantic statue of Musk's head, attached to the body of a goat (for "greatest of all time") that was clinging to a rocket that could actually shoot flames. The statue had cost six hundred thousand dollars to make. The bros loaded their gleaming metallic art work on a flatbed trailer, like a parade float, and drove it to Austin, hoping to present it as a tribute to Musk—and to be rewarded with his embrace. It was a "kamikaze mission," Ashley Sansalone, one of the brains behind the project, told me. He described Musk as "the most relevant person in the world."

It was an overcast fall day. I could hear the whine of race cars shifting gears. I estimated that about sixty folks were sitting around, eating hot dogs at picnic tables, as they waited for the organizers to decide when a proper posse had assembled. A woman was filming the event for her YouTube channel. Just as the light started to fade, the trailer with the giant statue moved toward the edge of the parking lot and people in the crowd clambered into their cars. Two yellow buses squeezed in behind the trailer. I spotted only one Tesla in the motorcade, which was mostly F-150s and Mustangs. After a few false starts, the procession headed onto Route 130 for the nine-mile trip to the Gigafactory. There was, of course, no chance that Musk was awaiting them. He was busy dismantling Twitter.

The metal Musk head crowned what looked like some Egyptian sarcophagus. We rode past former farmland that now lay uncultivated as its owners waited for the developers to appear, with their giant machines, to build more tract houses, followed by strip malls, schools, and fast-food restaurants. In this pregnant interim, the wintry yellow grassland looked naked. A cloud of starlings swirled like a black tornado and settled into the scrub. Many of the cars ahead and behind had their emergency lights flashing. I imagined that drivers coming the other way would wonder if we were part of a funeral cortège for some beloved member of the community.

In the distance was the Austin skyline, vast and cold and depressingly homogenous in the silvered light. I have seen it when the sun hits it just right and the mirrored surfaces catch fire—it's beautiful then, but not the city I had imagined it would become. I once knew the place so well, but every day it grows more unknowable and unlimited, and I feel more like a resident than like a citizen. But it remains a part of my psyche. It's home.

We turned onto Tesla Road, which was lined with newly planted trees and mounds of leftover rubble. One day, Musk has promised, he will turn the twenty-one-hundred-acre plot into an "ecological paradise." We passed signs warning, "MUST HAVE TESLA ID CARD." Then we beheld the Gigafactory—sleek, flat-topped, endless, signalling Austin's future as a megacity. We came to the gate, where guards had very efficiently established a barricade. One by one, we turned back toward the highway, where we each went our separate ways. ♦

PROFILES

DEFIANCE

Despite a near-fatal stabbing—and decades of death threats—Salman Rushdie won't stop telling stories.

BY DAVID REMNICK

When Salman Rushdie turned seventy-five, last summer, he had every reason to believe that he had outlasted the threat of assassination. A long time ago, on Valentine's Day, 1989, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, declared Rushdie's novel "The Satanic Verses" blasphemous and issued a fatwa ordering the execution of its author and "all those involved in its publication." Rushdie, a resident of London, spent the next decade in a fugitive existence, under constant police protection. But after settling in New York, in 2000, he lived freely, insistently unguarded. He refused to be terrorized.

There were times, though, when the lingering threat made itself apparent, and not merely on the lunatic reaches of the Internet. In 2012, during the annual autumn gathering of world leaders at the United Nations, I joined a small meeting of reporters with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran, and I asked him if the multimillion-dollar bounty that an Iranian foundation had placed on Rushdie's head had been rescinded. Ahmadinejad smiled with a glint of malice. "Salman Rushdie, where is he now?" he said. "There is no news of him. Is he in the United States? If he is in the U.S., you shouldn't broadcast that, for his own safety."

Within a year, Ahmadinejad was out of office and out of favor with the mullahs. Rushdie went on living as a free man. The years passed. He wrote book after book, taught, lectured, travelled, met with readers, married, divorced, and became a fixture in the city that was his adopted home. If he ever felt the need for some vestige of anonymity, he wore a baseball cap.

Recalling his first few months in New York, Rushdie told me, "People were scared to be around me. I thought, The only way I can stop that is to behave as if I'm not scared. I have to show them there's nothing to be scared about." One night, he went out to dinner with Andrew Wylie, his agent and friend, at Nick & Toni's, an extravagantly conspicuous restaurant in East Hampton. The painter Eric Fischl stopped by their table and said, "Shouldn't we all be afraid and leave the restaurant?"

"Well, I'm having dinner," Rushdie replied. "You can do what you like."

Fischl hadn't meant to offend, but sometimes there was a tone of derision in press accounts of Rushdie's "indefatigable presence on the New York nightlife scene," as Laura M. Holson put it in the *Times*. Some people thought he should have adopted a more austere posture toward his predicament. Would Solzhenitsyn have gone onstage with Bono or danced the night away at Moomba?

For Rushdie, keeping a low profile would be capitulation. He was a social being and would live as he pleased. He even tried to render the fatwa ridiculous. Six years ago, he played himself in an episode of "Curb Your Enthusiasm" in which Larry David provokes threats from Iran for mocking the Ayatollah while promoting his upcoming production "Fatwa! The Musical." David is terrified, but Rushdie's character assures him that life under an edict of execution, though it can be "scary," also makes a man alluring to women. "It's not exactly you, it's the fatwa wrapped around you, like sexy pixie dust!" he says.

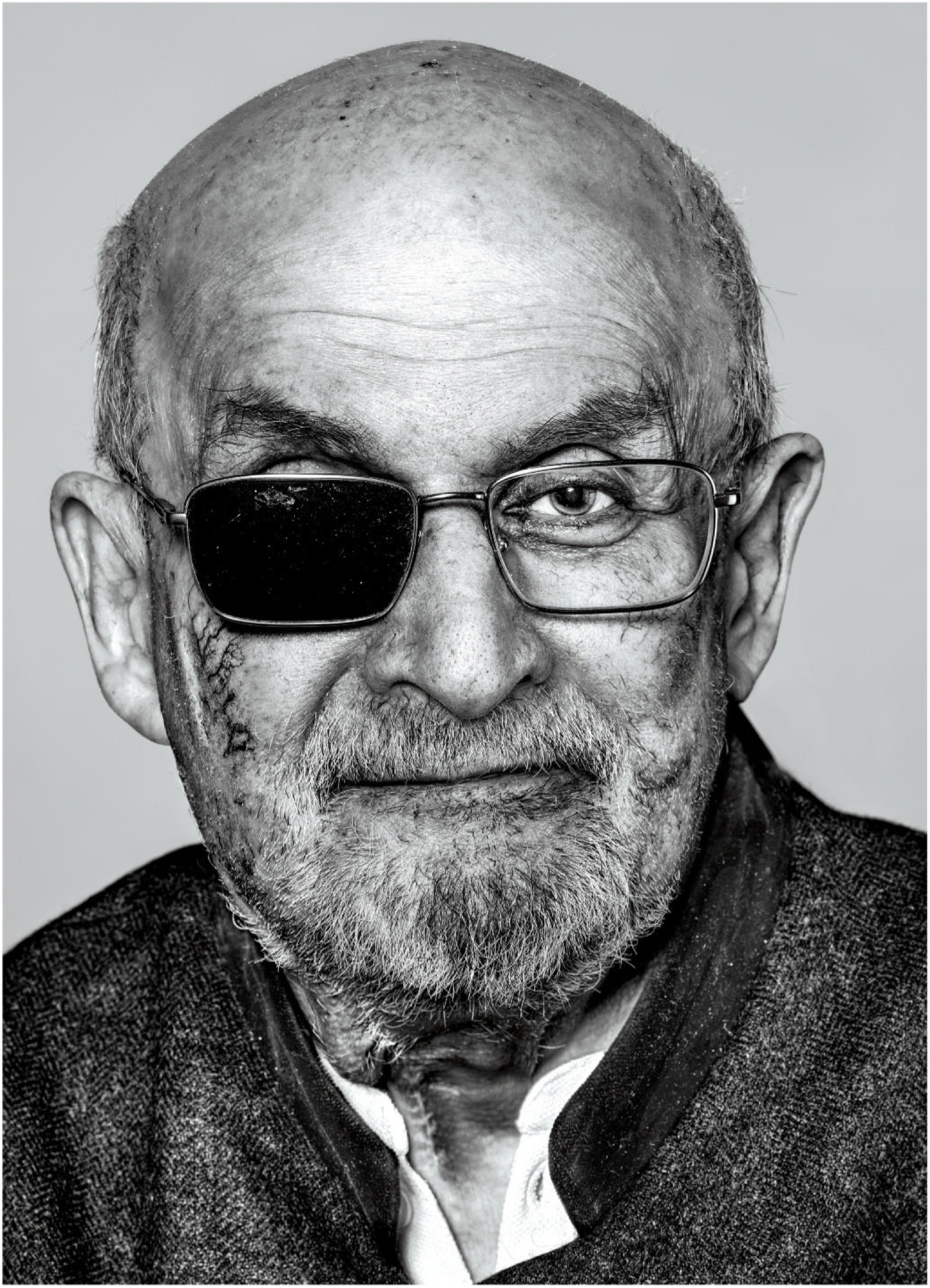
With every public gesture, it appeared, Rushdie was determined to show that he would not merely survive but flourish, at his desk and on the town. "There was no such thing as absolute security," he wrote in his third-person memoir, "Joseph Anton," published in 2012. "There were only varying degrees of insecurity. He would have to learn to live with that." He well understood that his demise would not require the coördinated efforts of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or Hezbollah; a cracked loner could easily do the job. "But I had come to feel that it was a very long time ago, and that the world moves on," he told me.

In September, 2021, Rushdie married the poet and novelist Rachel Eliza Griffiths, whom he'd met six years earlier, at a PEN event. It was his fifth marriage, and a happy one. They spent the pandemic together productively. By last July, Rushdie had made his final corrections on a new novel, titled "Victory City."

One of the sparks for the novel was a trip decades ago to the town of Hampi, in South India, the site of the ruins of the medieval Vijayanagara empire. "Victory City," which is presented as a recovered medieval Sanskrit epic, is the story of a young girl named Pampa Kampana, who, after witnessing the death of her mother, acquires divine powers and conjures into existence a glorious metropolis called Bisnaga, in which women resist patriarchal rule and religious tolerance prevails, at least for a while. The novel, firmly in the tradition of the wonder tale, draws on Rushdie's readings in Hindu mythology and in the history of South Asia.

"The first kings of Vijayanagara announced, quite seriously, that they were descended from the moon," Rushdie said. "So when these kings, Harihara and Bukka, announce that they're members of the lunar dynasty, they're basically associating themselves with those great heroes. It's like saying, 'I've descended from the same family as Achilles.' Or Agamemnon. And so I thought, Well, if you could say that, I can say anything."

Above all, the book is buoyed by the character of Pampa Kampana, who, Rushdie says, "just showed up in my head" and gave him his story, his sense of direction. The pleasure for Rushdie in writing the novel was in "world building" and, at the same time, writing about a character building that world: "It's me doing it, but it's also her doing it." The



"I've always thought that my books are more interesting than my life," Rushdie says. "The world appears to disagree."

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD BURBRIDGE

pleasure is infectious. "Victory City" is an immensely enjoyable novel. It is also an affirmation. At the end, with the great city in ruins, what is left is not the storyteller but her words:

> *I, Pampa Kampana, am the author of this book.*
> *I have lived to see an empire rise and fall.*
> *How are they remembered now, these kings, these queens?*
> *They exist now only in words . . .*
> *I myself am nothing now. All that remains is this city of words.*
> *Words are the only victors.*

It is hard not to read this as a credo of sorts. Over the years, Rushdie's friends have marvelled at his ability to write amid the fury unleashed on him. Martin Amis has said that, if he were in his shoes, "I would, by now, be a tearful and tranquilized three-hundred-pounder, with no eyelashes or nostril hairs." And yet "Victory City" is Rushdie's sixteenth book since the fatwa.

He was pleased with the finished manuscript and was getting encouragement from friends who had read it. ("I think 'Victory City' will be one of his books that will last," the novelist Hari Kunzru told me.) During the pandemic, Rushdie had also completed a play about Helen of Troy, and he was already toying with an idea for another novel. He'd reread Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain" and Franz Kafka's "The Castle," novels that deploy a naturalistic language to evoke strange, hermetic worlds—an alpine sanatorium, a remote provincial bureaucracy. Rushdie thought about using a similar approach to create a peculiar imaginary college as his setting. He started keeping notes. In the meantime, he looked forward to a peaceful summer and, come winter, a publicity tour to promote "Victory City."

On August 11th, Rushdie arrived for a speaking engagement at the Chautauqua Institution, situated on an idyllic property bordering a lake in southwestern New York State. There, for nine weeks every summer, a prosperous crowd intent on self-improvement and fresh air comes to attend lectures, courses, screenings, performances, and readings. Chautauqua has been a going concern since 1874. Franklin Roosevelt delivered his "I hate war" speech there, in 1936. Over the years, Rushdie has occasionally suffered from nightmares, and a couple of nights before the trip he dreamed of someone, "like a gladiator," attacking him with "a sharp object." But no midnight portent was going to keep him home. Chautauqua was a wholesome venue, with cookouts, magic shows, and Sunday school. One donor described it to me as "the safest place on earth."

Rushdie had agreed to appear onstage with his friend Henry Reese. Eighteen years ago, Rushdie helped Reese raise funds to create City of Asylum, a program in Pittsburgh that supports authors who have been driven into exile. On the morning of August 12th, Rushdie had breakfast with Reese and some donors on the porch of the Athenaeum Hotel, a Victorian pile near the lake. At the table, he told jokes and stories, admitting that he sometimes ordered books from Amazon even if he felt a little guilty about it. With mock pride, he bragged about his speed as a signer of books, though he had to concede that Amy Tan was quicker: "But she has an advantage, because her name is so short."

A crowd of more than a thousand was gathering at the amphitheatre. It was shorts-and-polo-shirt weather, sunny and clear. On the way into the venue, Reese introduced Rushdie to his ninety-three-year-old mother, and then they headed for the greenroom to spend time organizing their talk. The plan was to discuss the cultural hybridity of the imagination in contemporary literature, show some slides and describe City of Asylum, and, finally, open things up for questions.

At 10:45 A.M., Rushdie and Reese took their places onstage, settling into yellow armchairs. Off to the side, Sony Ton-Aime, a poet and the director of the literary-arts program at Chautauqua, stepped to a lectern to introduce the talk. At 10:47, there was a commotion. A young man ran down the aisle and climbed onto the stage. He was dressed all in black and armed with a knife.

Rushdie grew up in Bombay in a hillside villa with a view of the Arabian Sea. The family was Muslim, but secular. They were wealthy, though less so over time. Salman's father, Anis Ahmed Rushdie, was a textile manufacturer who, according to his son, had the business acumen of a "four-year-old child." But, for all his flaws, Rushdie's father read to him from the "great wonder tales of the East," including the stories of Scheherazade in the "Thousand and One Nights," the Sanskrit animal fables of the Panchatantra, and the exploits of Amir Hamza, an uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. Salman became obsessed with stories; they were his most valued inheritance. He spent countless hours at his local bookstore, Reader's Paradise. In time, he devoured the two vast Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata; the Greek and Roman myths; and the adventures of Bertie Wooster and Jeeves.

Nothing was sacred to young Rushdie, not even the stories with religious origins, but on some level he believed them all. He was particularly enraptured by the polytheistic storytelling traditions in which the gods behave badly, weirdly, hilariously. He was taken by a Hindu tale, the Samudra Manthan, in which gods and demons churn the Milky Way so that the stars release *amrita*, the nectar of immortality. He would look up at the night sky and imagine the nectar falling toward him. "Maybe if I opened my mouth," he said to himself, "a drop might fall in and then I would be immortal, too."

Later, Rushdie learned from the oral traditions as well. On a trip to Kerala, in South India, he listened to professional storytellers spin tales at outdoor gatherings where large crowds paid a few rupees and sat on the ground to listen for hours. What especially interested Rushdie was the style of these fabulists: circuitous, digressive, improvisational. "They've got three or four narrative balls in the air at any given moment, and they just juggle them," he said. That, too, fed his imagination and, eventually, his sense of the novel's possibilities.

At the age of thirteen, Rushdie was sent off to Rugby, a centuries-old British boarding school. There were three mistakes a boarder could make in those days, as he came to see it: be foreign, be clever, and be bad at games. He was all three. He was decidedly happier as a university student. At King's College, Cambridge, he met several times with E. M. Forster, the author of "Howards End" and "A Passage to India." "He was very encouraging when he heard that I wanted to be a writer," Rushdie told me. "And he said something which I treasured, which is that he felt that the great novel of India would be written by somebody from India with a Western education.

"I hugely admire 'A Passage to India,' because it was an anti-colonial book at a time when it was not at all fashionable to be anti-colonial," he went on. "What I kind of rebelled against was Forsterian English, which is very cool and meticulous. I thought, If there's one thing that India is not, it's not cool. It's hot and noisy and crowded and excessive. How do you find a language that's like that?"

As an undergraduate, Rushdie studied history, taking particular interest in the history of India, the United States, and Islam. Along the way, he read about the "Satanic verses," an episode in which the Prophet Muhammad ("one of the great geniuses of world history," Rushdie wrote years later) is said to have been deceived by Satan and made a proclamation venerating three goddesses; he soon reversed himself after the Archangel Gabriel revealed this deception, and the verses were expunged from the sacred record. The story raised many questions. The verses about the three goddesses had, it was said, initially been popular in Mecca, so why were they discredited? Was it to do with their subjects being female? Had Muhammad somehow flirted with polytheism, making the "revelation" false and satanic? "I thought, Good story," Rushdie said. "I found out later how good." He filed it away for later use.

"We bought the place sight unseen and then were informed it came with at least nine endangered species."

After graduating from Cambridge, Rushdie moved to London and set to work as a writer. He wrote novels and stories, along with glowing reviews of his future work which, as he later noted, "offered a fleeting, onanistic comfort, usually followed by a pang of shame." There was a great deal of typing, finishing, and then stashing away the results. One novel, "The Antagonist," was heavily influenced by Thomas Pynchon and featured a secondary character named Saleem Sinai, who was born at midnight August 14-15, 1947, the moment of Indian independence. (More for the file.) Another misfire, "Madame Rama," took aim at Indira Gandhi, who had imposed emergency rule in India. "Grimus" (1975), Rushdie's first published novel, was a sci-fi fantasy based on a twelfth-century Sufi narrative poem called "The Conference of the Birds." It attracted a few admirers, Ursula K. Le Guin among them, but had tepid reviews and paltry sales.

To underwrite this ever-lengthening apprenticeship, Rushdie, like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joseph Heller, and Don DeLillo, worked in advertising, notably at the firm Ogilvy & Mather. He wrote copy extolling the virtues of the *Daily Mirror*, Scotch Magic Tape, and Aero chocolate bars. He found the work easy. He has always been partial to puns, alliteration, limericks, wordplay of all kinds. In fact, as he approached his thirtieth birthday, his best-known achievement in letters was his campaign on behalf of Aero, "the bubbliest milk chocolate you can buy." He indelibly described the aerated candy bar as "Adorabubble," "Delectabubble," "Irresistabubble," and, when placed in store windows, "Availabubble here."

But advertising was hardly his life's ambition, and Rushdie now embarked on an "all or nothing" project. He went to India for an extended trip, a reimmersion in the subcontinent, with endless bus rides and countless conversations. It revived something in him; as he put it, "a world came flooding back." Here was the hot and noisy Bombay English that he'd been looking for. In 1981, when Rushdie was thirty-three, he published "Midnight's Children," an autobiographical-national epic of Bombay and the rise of post-colonial India. The opening of the novel is a remarkable instance of a unique voice announcing itself:

> I was born in the city of Bombay . . . once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more . . . On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clockhands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival

> at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. . . . I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate.

Perhaps the most distinct echo is from Saul Bellow's "The Adventures of Augie March": "I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way. . . ." When Rushdie shifted from the third-person narrator of his earlier drafts to the first-person address of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, the novel took off. Rushdie was suddenly back "in the world that made me." Forster had been onto something. In an English of his own devising, Rushdie had written a great Indian novel, a prismatic work with all the noise, abundance, multilingual complexity, wit, and, ultimately, political disappointment of the country he set out to describe. As he told me, "Bombay is a city built very largely on reclaimed land—reclaimed from the sea. And I thought of the book as being kind of an act of reclamation."

"Midnight's Children" is a novel of overwhelming muchness, of magic and mythologies. Saleem learns that a thousand other children were born at the same moment as he was, and that these thousand and one storytellers make up a vast subcontinental Scheherazade. Saleem is telepathically attuned to the cacophony of an infinitely varied post-colonial nation, with all its fissures and conflicts. "I was a radio receiver and could turn the volume down or up," he tells us. "I could select individual voices; I could even, by an effort of will, switch off my newly discovered ear."

The novel was quickly recognized as a classic. "We have an epic in our laps," John Leonard wrote in the *Times*. "The obvious comparisons are to Günter Grass in 'The Tin Drum' and to Gabriel García Márquez in 'One Hundred Years of Solitude.' I am happy to oblige the obvious." "Midnight's Children" won the Booker Prize in 1981, and, many years later, "the Booker of Bookers," the best of the best. One of the few middling reviews Rushdie received was from his father. His reading of the novel was, at best, dismissive; he could not have been pleased by the depiction of the protagonist's father, who, like him, had a drinking problem. "When you have a baby on your lap, sometimes it wets you, but you forgive it," he told Rushdie. It was only years later, when he was dying, that he came clean: "I was angry because every word you wrote was true."

Shortly after the publication of "Midnight's Children," Bill Buford, an American who had reinvented the literary quarterly *Granta* while studying at Cambridge, invited Rushdie to give a reading at a space above a hairdresser's. "I didn't know who was going to show up," Rushdie recalled. "The room was packed, absolutely bursting at the seams, and a large percentage were Indian readers. I was unbelievably moved. A rather well-dressed middle-aged lady in a fancy sari stood up at the end of the reading, in this sort of Q. & A. bit, and she said, 'I want to thank you, Mr. Rushdie, because you have told *my* story.' It still almost makes me cry."

"Midnight's Children" and its equally extravagant successor, "Shame," which is set in a country that is "not quite" Pakistan, managed to infuriate the leaders of India and Pakistan—Indira Gandhi sued Rushdie and his publisher, Jonathan Cape, for defamation; "Shame" was banned in Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan—but politics was hardly the only reason that his example was so liberating. Rushdie takes from Milan Kundera the idea that the history of the modern novel came from two distinct eighteenth-century streams, the realism of Samuel Richardson's "Clarissa" and the strangeness and irrealism of Laurence Sterne's "Tristram Shandy"; Rushdie gravitated to the latter, more fantastical, less populated tradition. His youthful readings had been followed by later excursions into Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Italo Calvino, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Mikhail Bulgakov, all of whom drew on folktales, allegory, and local mythologies to produce their "antic, ludic, comic, eccentric" texts.

SOFIA WARREN

"Is it too matchy-matchy?"

In turn, younger writers found inspiration in "Midnight's Children," especially those who came from backgrounds shaped by colonialism and migration. One such was Zadie Smith, who published her first novel, "White Teeth," in 2000, when she was twenty-four. "By the time I came of age, it was already canonical," Smith told me. "If I'm honest, I was a bit resistant to it as a monument—it felt very intimidating. But then, aged about eighteen, I finally read it, and I think the first twenty pages had as much influence on me as any book could. Bottled energy! That's the best way I can put it. And I recognized the energy. 'The empire writes back' is what we used to say of Rushdie, and I was also a distant child of that empire, and had grown up around people with Rushdie-level energy and storytelling prowess. . . . I hate that cliché of 'He kicked open the door so we could walk through it,' but in Salman's case it's the truth."

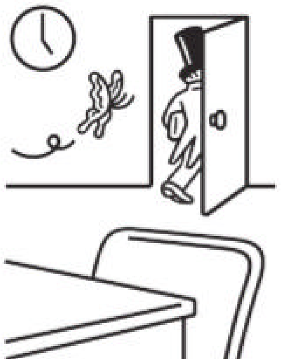
At the time, Rushdie had no idea that he would exert such an influence. "I was just thinking, I hope a few people read this weird book," he said. "This book with almost no white people in it and written in such strange English."

I first met Rushdie, fleetingly, in New York, at a 1986 convocation of PEN International. I was reporting on the gathering for the Washington *Post* and Rushdie was possibly the youngest luminary in a vast assemblage of writers from forty-five countries. Like a rookie at the all-star game, Rushdie enjoyed watching the veterans do their thing: Günter Grass throwing Teutonic thunderbolts at Saul Bellow; E. L. Doctorow lashing out at Norman Mailer, the president of PEN American Center, for inviting George Shultz, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State, to speak; Grace Paley hurling high heat at Mailer for his failure to invite more women. One afternoon, Rushdie was outside on Central Park South, taking a break from the conference, when he ran into a photographer from *Time*, who asked him to hop into a horse carriage for a picture. Rushdie found himself sitting beside Czesław Miłosz and Susan Sontag. For once, Rushdie said, he was "tongue-tied."

But the PEN convention was a diversion, as was a side project called "The Jaguar Smile," a piece of reporting on the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Rushdie was wrestling with the manuscript of "The Satanic Verses." The prose was no less vibrant and hallucinatory than that of "Midnight's Children" or "Shame," but the tale was mainly set in London. "There was a point in my life when I could have written a version of 'Midnight's Children' every few years," he said. "It would've sold, you know. But I always want to find a thing to do that I haven't done."

"The Satanic Verses" was published in September, 1988. Rushdie knew that, just as he had angered Indira Gandhi and General Zia-ul-Haq, he might offend some Muslim clerics with his treatment of Islamic history and various religious tropes. The Prophet is portrayed as imperfect yet earnest, courageous in the face of persecution. In any case, the novel is hardly dominated by religion. It is in large measure about identity in the modern world of migration. Rushdie thought of "The Satanic Verses" as a "love-song to our mongrel selves," a celebration of "hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs." In a tone more comic than polemical, it was at once a social novel, a novel of British Asians, and a phantasmagorical retelling of the grand narrative of Islam.

If there was going to be a fuss, Rushdie figured, it would pass soon enough. "It would be absurd to think that a book can cause riots," he told the Indian reporter Shrabani Basu before publication. Three years earlier, some British and American Muslims had protested peacefully against "My Beautiful Laundrette," with its irreverent screenplay by the British Pakistani writer Hanif Kureishi, but that ran its course quickly. What's more, in an era of racist "Paki-bashing," Rushdie was admired in London for speaking out about bigotry. In 1982, in a broadcast on Channel 4, he said, "British thought, British society, has never been cleansed of the filth of imperialism. It's still there, breeding lice and vermin, waiting for unscrupulous people to exploit it for their own ends."



In India, though, ahead of a national election, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government banned "The Satanic Verses." It was not immediately clear that the censorious fury would spread. In the U.K., the novel made the shortlist for the Booker Prize. (The winner was Peter Carey's "Oscar and Lucinda.") "The Satanic Verses" was even reviewed in the Iranian press. Attempts by religious authorities in Saudi Arabia to arouse anger about the book and have it banned throughout the world had at first only limited success, even in Arab countries. But soon the dam gave way. There were deadly riots in Kashmir and Islamabad; marches and book burnings in Bolton, Bradford, London, and Oldham; bomb threats against the publisher, Viking Penguin, in New York.

In Tehran, Ayatollah Khomeini was ailing and in crisis. After eight years of war with Iraq and hundreds of thousands of casualties, he had been forced to drink from the "poisoned chalice," as he put it, and accept a ceasefire with Saddam Hussein. The popularity of the revolutionary regime had declined. Khomeini's son admitted that his father never read "The Satanic Verses," but the mullahs around him saw an opportunity to reassert the Ayatollah's authority at home and to expand it abroad, even beyond the reach of his Shia followers. Khomeini issued the fatwa calling for Rushdie's execution. As Kenan Malik writes in "From Fatwa to Jihad," the edict "was a sign of weakness rather than of strength," a matter more of politics than of theology.

A reporter from the BBC called Rushdie at home and said, "How does it feel to know that you have just been sentenced to death by the Ayatollah Khomeini?"

Rushdie thought, *I'm a dead man. That's it. One day. Two days.* For the rest of his life, he would no longer be merely a storyteller; he would be a story, a controversy, an affair.

After speaking with a few more reporters, Rushdie went to a memorial service for his close friend Bruce Chatwin. Many of his friends were there. Some expressed concern, others tried consolation via wisecrack. "Next week we'll be back here for you!" Paul Theroux said. In those early days, Theroux recalled in a letter to Rushdie, he thought the fatwa was "a very bad joke, a bit like Papa Doc Duvalier putting a voodoo curse on Graham Greene for writing 'The Comedians.'" After the service, Martin Amis picked up a newspaper that carried the headline "EXECUTE RUSHDIE ORDERS THE AYATOLLAH." Rushdie, Amis thought, had now "vanished into the front page."

For the next decade, Rushdie lived underground, guarded by officers of the Special Branch, a unit of London's Metropolitan Police. The headlines and the threats were unceasing. People behaved well. People behaved disgracefully. There were friends of great constancy—Buford, Amis, James Fenton, Ian McEwan, Nigella Lawson, Christopher Hitchens, many more—and yet some regarded the fatwa as a problem Rushdie had brought on himself. Prince Charles made his antipathy clear at a dinner party that Amis attended: What should you expect if you insult people's deepest convictions? John le Carré instructed Rushdie to withdraw his book "until a calmer time has come." Roald Dahl branded him a "dangerous opportunist" who "knew exactly what he was doing and cannot plead otherwise." The singer-songwriter Cat Stevens, who had a hit with "Peace Train" and converted to Islam, said, "The Quran makes it clear—if someone defames the Prophet, then he must die.” Germaine Greer, George Steiner, and Auberon Waugh all expressed their disapproval. So did Jimmy Carter, the British Foreign Secretary, and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Among his detractors, an image hardened of a Rushdie who was dismissive of Muslim sensitivities and, above all, ungrateful for the expensive protection the government was providing him. The historian Hugh Trevor-Roper remarked, “I would not shed a tear if some British Muslims, deploring his manners, should waylay him in a dark street and seek to improve them. If that should cause him thereafter to control his pen, society would benefit, and literature would not suffer.”

The horror was that, thanks to Khomeini’s cruel edict, so many people did suffer. In separate incidents, Hitoshi Igarashi, the novel’s Japanese translator, and Ettore Capriolo, its Italian translator, were stabbed, Igarashi fatally; the book’s Norwegian publisher, William Nygaard, was fortunate to survive being shot multiple times. Bookshops from London to Berkeley were firebombed. Meanwhile, the Swedish Academy, the organization in Stockholm that awards the annual Nobel Prize in Literature, declined to issue a statement in support of Rushdie. This was a silence that went unbroken for decades.

Rushdie was in ten kinds of misery. His marriage to the novelist Marianne Wiggins fell apart. He was consumed by worry for the safety of his young son, Zafar. Initially, he maintained a language of bravado—“Frankly, I wish I had written a more critical book,” he told a reporter the day that the fatwa was announced—but he was living, he wrote, “in a waking nightmare.” “The Satanic Verses” was a sympathetic book about the plight of the deracinated, the very same young people he now saw on the evening news burning him in effigy. His antagonists were not merely offended; they insisted on a right not to be offended. As he told me, “This paradox is part of the story of my life.”

It was part of a still larger paradox. “The Satanic Verses” was published at a time when liberty was ascendant: by late 1989, the Berlin Wall had fallen; in the Soviet Union, the authority of the Communist Party was imploding. And yet the Rushdie affair prefigured other historical trends: struggles over multiculturalism and the boundaries of free speech; the rise of radical Islam and the reaction to it.

THE BLESSINGS

i gave mine away—
not all, but the greater portion,
some would say. i gave
away the ready claim
to goodness, to purpose. i gave
away mary, sarai,
and isis. i gave away
necessity and invention.
i gave away a whole
holiday, but i kept billie.
i gave away the chance to try
and fail to have it all. i gave
away the one thing
that makes some men
pay. i gave away the pedestal,
the bouquet. i gave away
nel wright, but i kept sula
peace. i gave away
the fine-tooth comb, but
kept the oyster knife. i gave
away the first word
the new mouth forms, the easiest
to parlay across so many
languages. escaping
the maw, i gave away
the power to hold—and be held
in—sway, but i kept
cho, parton, finney, chapman,
and tomei. i gave away the eve
who left the garden
that day, but kept the cool,
green, shady, fruitless,
fruitful stay, the evening
that did not fall
away.

—*Evie Shockley*

For some young writers, the work proved intensely generative. The playwright and novelist Ayad Akhtar, who is now the president of PEN America, grew up in a Muslim community in Milwaukee. He told me he remembers how friends and loved ones were gravely offended by “The Satanic Verses”; at the same time, the novel changed his life. “It was one of those experiences where I couldn’t believe what I was reading, both the beauty of it and, as a believing Muslim, I grappled with the shock of its extraordinary irreverence,” he said. “By the time I got to the end of that book, I was a different person. I suppose it was like being a young believing Irish Catholic in the twenties and encountering ‘A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.’ ”

Amid the convulsions of the late nineteen-eighties, though, the book was vilified by people who knew it only through caricature and vitriol. A novelist who had set out to write about the complexities of South Asians in London was now, in mosques around the city and around the world, described as a figure of traitorous evil. Rushdie, out of a desire to calm the waters, met with a group of local Muslim leaders and signed a declaration affirming his faith in Islam. It was, he reasoned, true in a way: although he did not believe in supernaturalism or the orthodoxies of the creed, he had regard for the culture and civilization of Islam. He now attested that he did not agree with any statement made by any character in the novel that cast aspersions on Islam or the Prophet Muhammad, and that he would suspend the publication of the paperback edition "while any risk of further offense exists."

Ayatollah Khomeini had died by this time, and his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was unmoved. His response was that the fatwa would remain in place even if Rushdie "repents and becomes the most pious man of his time." A newspaper in Tehran advised Rushdie to "prepare for death."

He was humiliated. It had been a mistake, he decided, to try to appease those who wanted his head. He would not make it again. As he put it in "Joseph Anton":

> He needed to understand that there were people who would never love him. No matter how carefully he explained his work or clarified his intentions in creating it, they would not love him. The unreasoning mind, driven by the doubt-free absolutes of faith, could not be convinced by reason. Those who had demonized him would never say, "Oh, look, he's not a demon after all." . . . He needed, now, to be clear of what he was fighting for. Freedom of speech, freedom of the imagination, freedom from fear, and the beautiful, ancient art of which he was privileged to be a practitioner. Also skepticism, irreverence, doubt, satire, comedy, and unholy glee. He would never again flinch from the defense of these things.

Since 1989, Rushdie has had to shut out not only the threats to his person but the constant dissections of his character, in the press and beyond. "There was a moment when there was a 'me' floating around that had been invented to show what a bad person I was," he said. " 'Evil.' 'Arrogant.' 'Terrible writer.' 'Nobody would've read him if there hadn't been an attack against his book.' Et cetera. I've had to fight back against that false self. My mother used to say that her way of dealing with unhappiness was to forget it. She said, 'Some people have a memory. I have a forget-ory.' "

Rushdie went on, "I just thought, There are various ways in which this event can destroy me as an artist." He could refrain from writing altogether. He could write "revenge books" that would make him a creature of circumstances. Or he could write "scared books," novels that "shy away from things, because you worry about how people will react to them." But he didn't want the fatwa to become a determining event in his literary trajectory: "If somebody arrives from another planet who has never heard of anything that happened to me, and just has the books on the shelf and reads them chronologically, I don't think that alien would think, Something terrible happened to this writer in 1989. The books go on their own journey. And that was really an act of will."

Some people in Rushdie's circle and beyond are convinced that, in the intervening decades, self-censorship, a fear of giving offense, has too often become the order of the day. His friend Hanif Kureishi has said, "Nobody would have the balls today to write 'The Satanic Verses,' let alone publish it."

At the height of the fatwa, Rushdie set out to make good on a promise to his son, Zafar, and complete a book of stories, tales that he told the boy in his bath. That book, which appeared in 1990, is "Haroun and the Sea of Stories." (Haroun is Zafar's middle name.) It concerns a twelve-year-old boy's attempt to restore his father's gift for storytelling. "Luck has a way of running out without the slightest warning," Rushdie writes, and so it has been with Rashid, the Shah of Blah, a storyteller. His wife leaves him; he loses his gift. When he opens his mouth, he can say only "Ark, ark, ark." His nemesis is the Cultmaster, a tyrant from the land of Chup, who opposes "stories and fancies and dreams," and imposes Silence Laws on his subjects; some of his devotees "work themselves up into great frenzies and sew their lips together with stout twine." In the end, the son is a savior, and stories triumph over tyranny. "My father has definitely not given up," Haroun concludes. "You can't cut off his Story Water supply." And so, in the midst of a nightmare, Rushdie wrote one of his most enjoyable books, and an allegory of the necessity and the resilience of art.

Among the stories Rushdie was determined to tell was the story of his life. This required a factual approach, and when he published that memoir, "Joseph Anton," a decade ago, he intended to be self-scrutinizing, tougher on himself than on anybody else. That is not invariably the case. He is harsh about publishers who, while standing fully behind Rushdie and his novel, felt it necessary to make compromises along the way (notably, delaying paperback publication) to protect the lives of their staffs. Some of the passages about his second, third, and fourth wives—Marianne Wiggins, Elizabeth West, and Padma Lakshmi—are unkind, even vindictive. He is, in general, not known for restraint in his public utterances, and his responses to personal and literary chastisements are sometimes ill-tempered. In some ways, "Joseph Anton" reminded me of Solzhenitsyn's memoir "The Oak and the Calf," not because the two writers share similar personalities or politics but because both, while showing extraordinary courage, remain human, sometimes heroic and sometimes petulant.

At the end of "Joseph Anton"—the title is his fatwa-era code name, the first names of two favorite writers, Conrad and Chekhov—there is a movement into the light, a resolution. His "little battle," he wrote in the final pages, "was coming to an end." With a sense of joy, he embarks on a new novel:

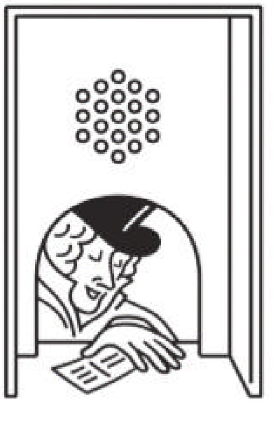
> This in the end was who he was, a teller of tales, a creator of shapes, a maker of things that were not. It would be wise to withdraw from the world of commentary and polemic and rededicate himself to what he loved most, the art that had claimed his heart, mind and spirit ever since he was a young man, and to live again in the universe of once upon a time, of *kan ma kan*, it was so and it was not so, and to make the journey to the truth upon the waters of make-believe.

Rushdie moved to New York and tried to put the turmoil behind him.

On the night of August 11th, a twenty-four-year-old man named Hadi Matar slept under the stars on the grounds of the Chautauqua Institution. His parents, Hassan Matar and Silvana Fardos, came from Yaroun, Lebanon, a village just north of the Israeli border, and immigrated to California, where Hadi was born. In 2004, they divorced. Hassan Matar returned to Lebanon; Silvana Fardos, her son, and her twin daughters eventually moved to New Jersey. In recent years, the family has lived in a two-story house in Fairview, a suburb across the Hudson River from Manhattan.

In 2018, Matar went to Lebanon to visit his father. At least initially, the journey was not a success. "The first hour he gets there he called me, he wanted to come back," Fardos told a reporter for the *Daily Mail*. "He stayed for approximately twenty-eight days, but the trip did not go well with his father, he felt very alone."

When he returned to New Jersey, Matar became a more devout Muslim. He was also withdrawn and distant; he took to criticizing his mother for failing to provide a proper religious upbringing. "I was expecting him to come back motivated, to complete school, to get his degree and a job," Fardos said. Instead, she said, Matar stashed himself away in the basement, where he stayed up all night, reading and playing video games, and slept during the day. He held a job at a nearby Marshall's, the discount department store, but quit after a couple of months. Many weeks would go by without his saying a word to his mother or his sisters.



Matar did occasionally venture out of the house. He joined the State of Fitness Boxing Club, a gym in North Bergen, a couple of miles away, and took evening classes: jump rope, speed bag, heavy bag, sparring. He impressed no one with his skills. The owner, a firefighter named Desmond Boyle, takes pride in drawing out the people who come to his gym. He had no luck with Matar. "The only way to describe him was that every time you saw him it seemed like the worst day of his life," Boyle told me. "There was always this look on him that his dog had just died, a look of sadness and dread every day. After he was here for a while, I tried to reach out to him, and he barely whispered back." He kept his distance from everyone else in the class. As Boyle put it, Matar was "the definition of a lone wolf." In early August, Matar sent an e-mail to the gym dropping his membership. On the header, next to his name, was the image of the current Supreme Leader of Iran.

Matar read about Rushdie's upcoming event at Chautauqua on Twitter. On August 11th, he took a bus to Buffalo and then hired a Lyft to bring him to the grounds. He bought a ticket for Rushdie's appearance and killed time. "I was hanging around pretty much," he said in a brief interview in the New York *Post*. "Not doing anything in particular, just walking around."

In Zadie Smith's "White Teeth," a radicalized young man named Millat joins a group called KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation) and, along with some like-minded friends, heads for a demonstration against an offending novel and its author: " 'You read it?' asked Ranil, as they whizzed past Finsbury Park. There was a general pause. Millat said, 'I haven't exackly read it exackly—but I know all about that shit, yeah?' To be more precise, Millat hadn't read it." Neither had Matar. He had looked at only a couple of pages of "The Satanic Verses," but he had watched videos of Rushdie on YouTube. "I don't like him very much," he told the *Post*. "He's someone who attacked Islam, he attacked their beliefs, the belief systems." He pronounced the author "disingenuous."

Rushdie was accustomed to events like the one at Chautauqua. He had done countless readings, panels, and lectures, even revelled in them. His partner onstage, Henry Reese, had not. To settle his nerves, Reese took a deep breath and gazed out at the crowd. It was calming, all the friendly, expectant faces. Then there was noise—quick steps, a huffing and puffing, an exertion. Reese turned to the noise, to Rushdie. A black-clad man was all over the writer. At first, Reese said, "I thought it was a prank, some really bad-taste imitation attack, something like the Will Smith slap." Then he saw blood on Rushdie's neck, blood flecked on the backdrop with Chautauqua signage. "It then became clear there was a knife there, but at first it seemed like just hitting. For a second, I froze. Then I went after the guy. Instinctively. I ran over and tackled him at the back and held him by his legs." Matar had stabbed Rushdie about a dozen times. Now he turned on Reese and stabbed him, too, opening a gash above his eye.

A doctor who had had breakfast with Rushdie that morning was sitting on the aisle in the second row. He got out of his seat, charged up the stairs, and headed for the melee. Later, the doctor, who asked me not to use his name, said he was sure that Reese, by tackling Matar, had helped save the writer's life. A New York state trooper put Matar in handcuffs and led him off the stage.

Rushdie was on his back, still conscious, bleeding from stab wounds to the right side of his neck and face, his left hand, and his abdomen just under his rib cage. By now, a firefighter was at Rushdie's side, along with four doctors—an anesthesiologist, a radiologist, an internist, and an obstetrician. Two of the doctors held Rushdie's legs up to return blood flow to the body. The fireman had one hand on the right side of Rushdie's neck to stanch the bleeding and another hand near his eye. The fireman told Rushdie, "Don't blink your eye, we are trying to stop the bleeding. Keep it closed." Rushdie was responsive. "O.K. I agree," he said. "I understand."

Rushdie's left hand was bleeding badly. Using a pair of scissors, one of the doctors cut the sleeve off his jacket and tried to stanch the wound with a clean handkerchief. Within seconds, the handkerchief was saturated, the blood coming out "like holy hell," the doctor recalled. Someone handed him a bunch of paper towels. "I squeezed the tissues as hard as I possibly could."

"What's going on with my left hand?" Rushdie said. "It hurts so much!" There was a spreading pool of blood near his left hip.

E.M.T.s arrived, hooked Rushdie up to an I.V., and eased him onto a stretcher. They wheeled him out of the amphitheatre and got him on a helicopter, which transferred him to a Level 2 trauma center, Hamot, part of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Rushdie had travelled alone to Chautauqua. Back in New York, his wife, Rachel Eliza Griffiths, got a call at around midday telling her that her husband had been attacked and was in surgery. She raced to arrange a flight to Erie and get to the hospital. When she arrived, he was still in the operating room.

In Chautauqua, people walked around the grounds in a daze. As one of the doctors who had run onto the stage to help Rushdie told me, "Chautauqua was the one place where I felt completely at ease. For a second, it was like a dream. And then it wasn't. It made no sense, then it made all the sense in the world."

Rushdie was hospitalized for six weeks. In the months since his release, he has mostly stayed home save for trips to doctors, sometimes two or three a day. He'd lived without security for more than two decades. Now he's had to rethink that.

Just before Christmas, on a cold and rainy morning, I arrived at the midtown office of Andrew Wylie, Rushdie's literary agent, where we'd arranged to meet. After a while, I heard the door to the agency open. Rushdie, in an accent that bears traces of all his cities—Bombay, London, New York—was greeting agents and assistants, people he had not seen in many months. The sight of him making his way down the hall was startling: He has lost more than forty pounds since the stabbing. The right lens of his eyeglasses is blacked over. The attack left him blind in that eye, and he now usually reads with an iPad so that he can adjust the light and the size of the type. There is scar tissue on the right side of his face. He speaks as fluently as ever, but his lower lip droops on one side. The ulnar nerve in his left hand was badly damaged.

Rushdie took off his coat and settled into a chair across from his agent's desk. I asked how his spirits were.

"Well, you know, I've been better," he said dryly. "But, considering what happened, I'm not so bad. As you can see, the big injuries are healed, essentially. I have feeling in my thumb and index finger and in the bottom half of the palm. I'm doing a lot of hand therapy, and I'm told that I'm doing very well."

"Can you type?"

"Not very well, because of the lack of feeling in the fingertips of these fingers."

What about writing?

"I just write more slowly. But I'm getting there."

Sleeping has not always been easy. "There have been nightmares—not exactly the incident, but just frightening. Those seem to be diminishing. I'm fine. I'm able to get up and walk around. When I say I'm fine, I mean, there's bits of my body that need constant checkups. It was a colossal attack."

More than once, Rushdie looked around the office and smiled. "It's great to be back," he said. "It's someplace which is not a hospital, which is mostly where I've been to. And to be in this agency is—I've been coming here for decades, and it's a very familiar space to me. And to be able to come here to talk about literature, talk about books, to talk about this novel, 'Victory City,' to be able to talk about the thing that most matters to me . . ."

At this meeting and in subsequent conversations, I sensed conflicting instincts in Rushdie when he replied to questions about his health: there was the instinct to move on—to talk about literary matters, his book, anything but the decades-long fatwa and now the attack—and the instinct to be absolutely frank. "There is such a thing as P.T.S.D., you know," he said after a while. "I've found it very, very difficult to write. I sit down to write, and nothing happens. I write, but it's a combination of blankness and junk, stuff that I write and that I delete the next day. I'm not out of that forest yet, really."

He added, "I've simply never allowed myself to use the phrase 'writer's block.' Everybody has a moment when there's nothing in your head. And you think, Oh, well, there's never going to be anything. One of the things about being seventy-five and having written twenty-one books is that you know that, if you keep at it, something will come."

Had that happened in the past months?

Rushdie frowned. "Not really. I mean, I've tried, but not really." He was only lately "just beginning to feel the return of the juices."

How to go on living after thinking you had emerged from years of threat, denunciation, and mortal danger? And now how to recover from an attack that came within millimetres of killing you, and try to live, somehow, as if it could never recur?

He seemed grateful for a therapist he had seen since before the attack, a therapist "who has a lot of *work* to do. He knows me and he's very helpful, and I just talk things through."

The talk was plainly in the service of a long-standing resolution. "I've always tried very hard not to adopt the role of a victim," he said. "Then you're just sitting there saying, Somebody stuck a knife in me! Poor me. . . . Which I do sometimes think." He laughed. "It *hurts*. But what I don't think is: That's what I want people reading the book

"I'm going to exaggerate the size of the fish."

CAUTION
MEN AT WORK BUT MOSTLY ON TWITTER
CAUTION
MEN AT WORK
TOMMY SIEGEL

to think. I want them to be captured by the tale, to be carried away."

Many years ago, he recalled, there were people who seemed to grow tired of his persistent existence. "People didn't like it. Because I should have died. Now that I've *almost* died, everybody loves me. . . . That was my mistake, back then. Not only did I live but I tried to live well. Bad mistake. Get fifteen stab wounds, much better."

As he lay in the hospital, Rushdie received countless texts and e-mails sending love, wishing for his recovery. "I was in utter shock," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian novelist, told me. "I just didn't believe he was still in any real danger. For two days, I kept vigil, sending texts to friends all over the world, searching the Internet to make sure he was still alive." There was a reading in his honor on the steps of the New York Public Library.

For some writers, the shock brought certain issues into hard focus. "The attack on Salman clarified a lot of things for me," Ayad Akhtar told me. "I know I have a much brighter line that I draw for myself between the potential harms of speech and the freedom of the imagination. They are incommensurate and shouldn't be placed in the same paragraph."

Rushdie was stirred by the tributes that his near-death inspired. "It's very nice that everybody was so moved by this, you know?" he said. "I had never thought about how people would react if I was assassinated, or almost assassinated."

And yet, he said, "I'm lucky. What I really want to say is that my main overwhelming feeling is gratitude." He was grateful to those who showed their support. He was grateful to the doctors, the E.M.T. workers, and the fireman in Chautauqua who stanched his wounds, and he was grateful to the surgeons in Erie. "At some point, I'd like to go back up there and say thank you." He was also grateful to his two grown sons, Zafar and Milan, who live in London, and to Griffiths. "She kind of took over at a point when I was helpless." She dealt with the doctors, the police, and the investigators, and with transport from Pennsylvania to New York. "She just took over everything, as well as having the emotional burden of my almost being killed."

Did he think it had been a mistake to let his guard down since moving to New York? "Well, I'm asking myself that question, and I don't know the answer to it," he said. "I did have more than twenty years of life. So, is that a mistake? Also, I wrote a lot of books. 'The Satanic Verses' was my fifth published book—my fourth published novel—and this is my twenty-first. So, three-quarters of my life as a writer has happened since the fatwa. In a way, you can't regret your life."

Whom does he blame for the attack?

"I blame *him*," he said.

Anyone else? Was he let down by security at Chautauqua?

"I've tried very hard over these years to avoid recrimination and bitterness," he said. "I just think it's not a good look. One of the ways I've dealt with this whole thing is to look forward and not backwards. What happens tomorrow is more important than what happened yesterday."

The publication of "Victory City," he made plain, was his focus. He's interested to see how the novel will be received. Will it be viewed through the prism of the stabbing? He recalled the "sympathy wave" that came with "The Satanic Verses," how sales shot up with the fatwa. It happened again after he was stabbed nearly to death last summer.

He is eager, always, to talk about the new novel's grounding in Indian history and mythology, how the process of writing accelerated, just as it had with "Midnight's Children," once he found the voice of his main character; how the book can be read as an allegory about the abuse of power and the curse of sectarianism—the twin curses of India under its current Prime Minister, the Hindu supremacist Narendra Modi. But, once more, Rushdie knows, his new novel will have to compete for attention with the ugliness of real life. "I'm hoping that to some degree it might change the subject. I've always thought that my books are more interesting than my life," he said. "Unfortunately, the world appears to disagree."

Hadi Matar is being held in the Chautauqua County Jail, in the village of Mayville. He's been charged with attempted murder in the second degree, which could bring twenty-five years in prison; he's also been charged with assault in the second degree, for the attack on Henry Reese, which could bring an additional seven. The trial is unlikely to take place until next year.

"It's a relatively simple event when you think about it," Jason Schmidt, the

Chautauqua County district attorney, told me. "We know this was a preplanned, unprovoked attack by an individual who had no prior interaction with the criminal-justice system." The prosecutor's job is no doubt made easier by the fact that there were hundreds of witnesses to the crime.

Matar is being represented by Nathaniel Barone, a public defender. At a court hearing not long after the stabbing, Barone accompanied Matar, who wore handcuffs, a face mask, and prison garb with broad black and white stripes. Matar's hair and beard were closely cropped. He said very little save for his plea of not guilty. Barone, wearing a suit and tie, stood by his client. He seems unillusioned. When I suggested that he had a near-impossible case, he did not dispute it: "Almost to a person they are saying, 'What is this guy's defense? Everyone saw him do it!'" Barone said he has hundreds of expert witnesses on file, and he will be consulting some of them on matters of psychology and radicalization. He also indicated that he might challenge the admissibility of Matar's interview with the New York *Post*, saying (without supplying any evidence) that it was possibly obtained under false pretenses. (The *Post* said that its journalist had identified himself and that "Mr. Matar absolutely understood that he was speaking to a reporter.")

It is unknown if Matar was acting under anyone's tutelage or instructions, but the Iranian state media has repeatedly expressed its approval of his attempt to kill Rushdie. Just last month, Hossein Salami, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, said Matar had acted "bravely" and warned that the staff of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, which had been attacked by Muslim extremists in 2015, should consider "the fate" of Rushdie if it continues to mock Ayatollah Khamenei.

As for Matar's mother and her remarks to the press about his behavior and their fraught relationship, Barone sighed and said, "Obviously, it's always concerning when you see a description from the mother about your client which can be interpreted in a negative way." He did not contest her remarks.

Barone has met with Matar on his cellblock and has found him coöperative. "I've had absolutely no problems with Mr. Matar," he said. "He has been cordial and respectful, openly discussing things with me. He is a very sincere young man. It would be like meeting any young man. There's nothing that sets him apart."

Matar is in a "private area" of the cellblock. He spends much of his time reading the Quran and other material. "I'm getting to know him, but it's not easy," Barone said. "The reality of sitting in jail, incarcerated—it's easy to have no hope. It's easy to think things aren't going to work out for you. But I tell clients you have to have hope." He assured me that Matar "isn't taking this lightly. Some people just don't give a damn about things."

Does he show any remorse?

Barone replied that he could not say "at this point."

Rushdie told me that he thought of Matar as an "idiot." He paused and, aware that it wasn't much of an observation, said, "I don't know what I think of him, because I don't know him." One had a faint sense of a writer grappling with a character—and a human being grappling with a nemesis—who remains frustratingly vaporous. "All I've seen is his idiotic interview in the New York *Post*. Which only an idiot would do. I know that the trial is still a long way away. It might not happen until late next year. I guess I'll find out some more about him then."

Rushdie has spent these past months healing. He's watched his share of "crap television." He couldn't find anything or anyone to like in "The White Lotus" ("Awful!") or the Netflix documentary on Meghan and Harry ("The banality of it!"). The World Cup was an extended pleasure, though. He was thrilled by the advance of the Moroccans and the preternatural performances of France's Kylian Mbappé and Argentina's Lionel Messi, and he was moved by the support shown by players for the protests in Iran, which he hopes could be a "tipping point" for the regime in Tehran.

There will, of course, be no book tour for "Victory City." But so long as his health is good and security is squared away he is hoping to go to London for the opening of "Helen," his play about Helen of Troy. "I'm going to tell you really truthfully, I'm not thinking about the long term," he said. "I'm thinking about little step by little step. I just think, Bop till you drop."

When we picked up the subject a couple of weeks later, in a conversation over Zoom, he said, "I've got nothing else to do. I would like to have a second skill, but I don't. I always envied writers like Günter Grass, who had a second career as a visual artist. I thought how nice it must be to spend a day wrestling with words, and then get up and walk down the street to your art studio and become something completely else. I don't have that. So, all I can do is this. As long as there's a story that I think is worth giving my time to, then I will. When I have a book in my head, it's as if the rest of the world is in its correct shape."

It's "depressing" when he's struggling at his desk, he admits. He wonders if the stories will come. But he's still there, putting in the time.

Rushdie looked around his desk, gestured to the books that line the walls of his study. "I feel everything's O.K. when I'm sitting here, and I have something to think about," he said. "Because that takes over from the outside world. Of course, the interior world is connected to the exterior world, but, when you are in the act of making, it takes over from everything else."

For now, he has set aside the idea for a novel inspired by Kafka and Mann, and is thinking through a kind of sequel to "Joseph Anton." At first, he was irritated by the idea, "because it felt almost like it was being forced on me—the attack demanded that I should write about the attack." In recent weeks, though, the idea has taken hold. Rushdie's books tend to be IMAX-scale, large-cast productions, but in order to write about the attack in Chautauqua, an event that took place in a matter of seconds, he envisions something more "microscopic."

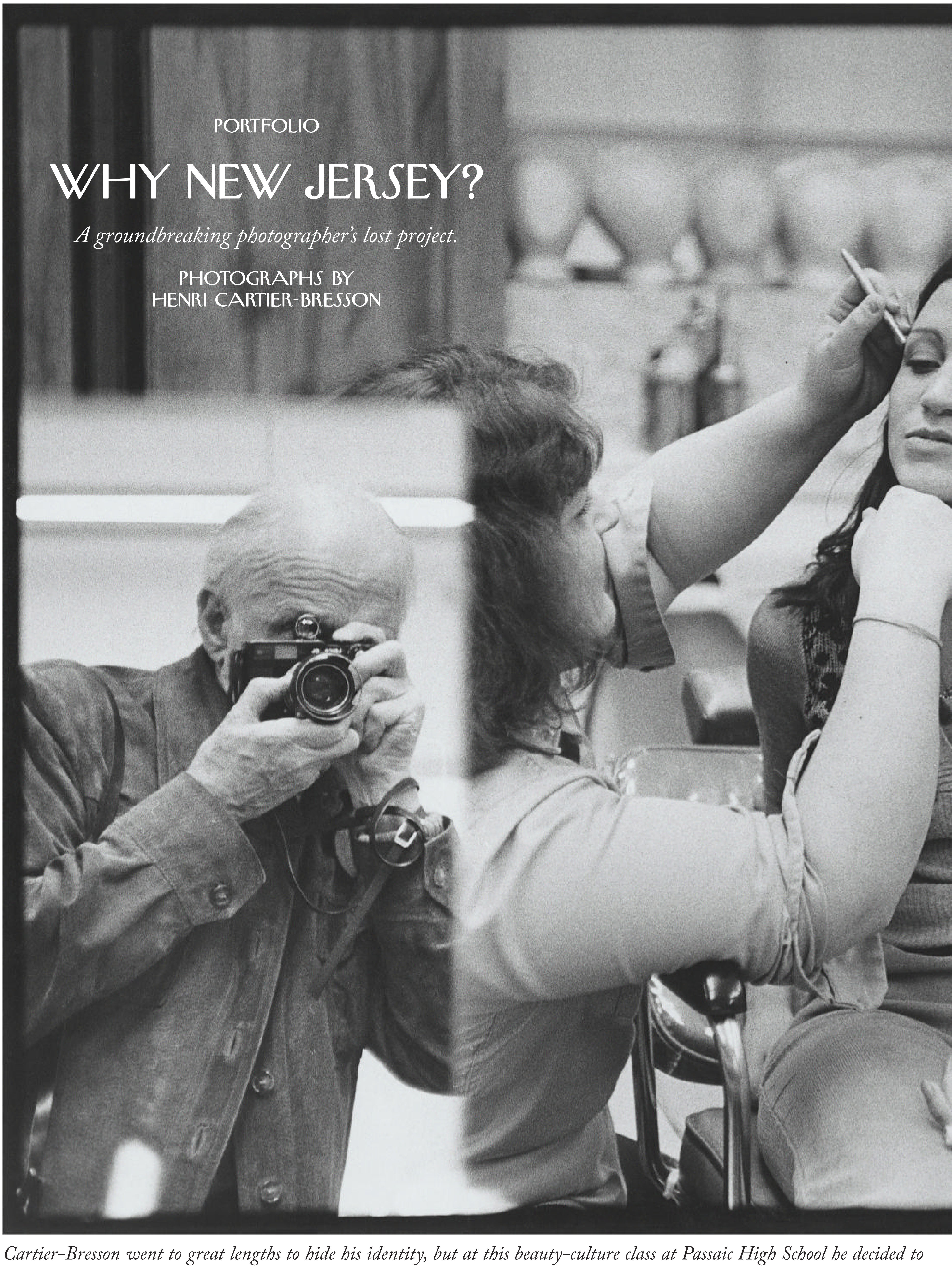
And the voice would be different. The slightly distanced, third-person voice that "Joseph Anton" employed seems wrong for the task. "This doesn't feel third-person-ish to me," Rushdie said. "I think when somebody sticks a knife into you, that's a first-person story. That's an 'I' story." ♦

PORTFOLIO

WHY NEW JERSEY?

A groundbreaking photographer's lost project.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON



Cartier-Bresson went to great lengths to hide his identity, but at this beauty-culture class at Passaic High School he decided to

THE HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON FOUNDATION / MAGNUM

insert himself. The self-portrait, along with the rest of his New Jersey project, has gone unseen for almost fifty years.

In 1975, the renowned photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson received an invitation to travel from Paris to America for what would become one of his final photographic projects. Choose any subject, anywhere, he was told. His choice? New Jersey. *New Jersey*? He seemed delighted by his own provocation. "Why New Jersey?" he said. "Because people make such a funny face when you mention New Jersey."

Cartier-Bresson was semi-retired; he would spend the rest of his life drawing. His patron was unlikely: Jaune Evans, a young associate producer for "Assignment America," a television show on the public-broadcasting station WNET. Her proposal was to devote an episode to the project of his choosing. Her partner, a photographer named Peter Cunningham, would be his assistant. They were shocked when Cartier-Bresson accepted. When he arrived, people asked "Why New Jersey?" so often it became the episode's title.

It's a fair question. Even we New Jerseyans don't spend much time thinking about New Jersey. It's not, as out-of-towners imagine, that it feels like nowhere—it's that it feels like anywhere. In 1975, Philip Roth was too deviant to be totemic. "The Sopranos" was decades in the future. "It was a no-past, no-future state of existence," Cunningham recalled. Jersey was the place between the places you wanted to be. To Cartier-Bresson, a master of formal composition, the confinement appealed. "Everybody is trapped by something," he told Evans. "For me, liberty is a strict frame of reference, and inside that frame of reference all the variations are possible."

The photographer felt that New Jersey's anywhere-ness, its density and diversity, was "a kind of shortcut through America." With that prompt, Evans assembled an itinerary. Cunningham picked up Cartier-Bresson in Manhattan around sunrise each day for three weeks and headed for the bridges and tunnels. They embedded with ambulance drivers in Newark and chicken farmers in West Orange. They visited suburban sprawl, horse country, pine barrens, swamps, seashore, beauty parlors, labs, nuclear facilities, jails, mansions. They once stayed overnight in a South Jersey motel, and Cartier-Bresson insisted that they flip a coin to determine who got the bed.

Down the shore that month, Bruce Springsteen was agonizing over what would become "Born to Run." The two artists conjured a similar mythology: asphalt and steel, operatic death on dirty streets, traps and escape. Cartier-Bresson also found humor—two men wearing the same suit, a gaggle of disembodied mannequin heads. By coincidence, Cunningham had been working as a photographer for Springsteen. "In a way, this year, 1975, was Jersey's birthing year," Cunningham told me.

During week four, a video crew was supposed to shadow Cartier-Bresson. But he considered anonymity essential, to the degree that he once travelled under the alias Hank Carter. When the day came, he fled. "We were chasing him through Newark in a little van," Evans said. "He was like a gazelle. He ran through the backstreets avoiding us."

After Cartier-Bresson returned to Paris, a WNET director committed a betrayal. To fit the photographs to a TV screen, he cropped them—a practice Cartier-Bresson viewed as sacrilege. His agent was furious. The episode aired, but the project was effectively excluded from catalogues of the photographer's work.

Cartier-Bresson left the only prints, more than a hundred total, with Evans and Cunningham. To him, a picture was a moment; he had no use for it once the moment was gone. Out of fealty, they kept these uncropped photos private. "We put them on the shelf," Cunningham said, and there they remained for almost fifty years.

—Zach Helfand

Cartier-Bresson followed a schedule at work, but "he would have the camera with him at all times," Cunningham has said, including in the car. He viewed any alterations of his photographs as "degenerations."

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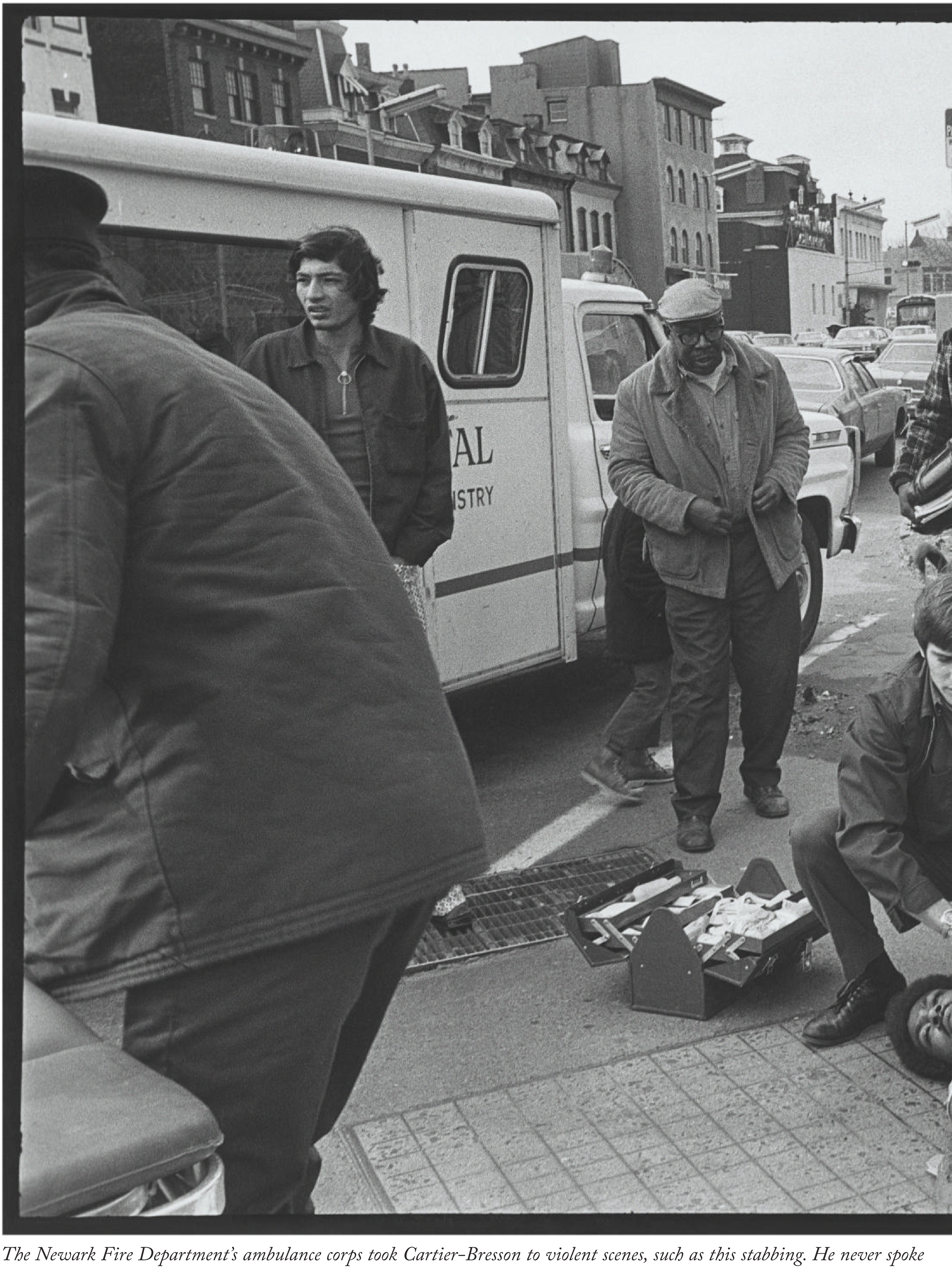
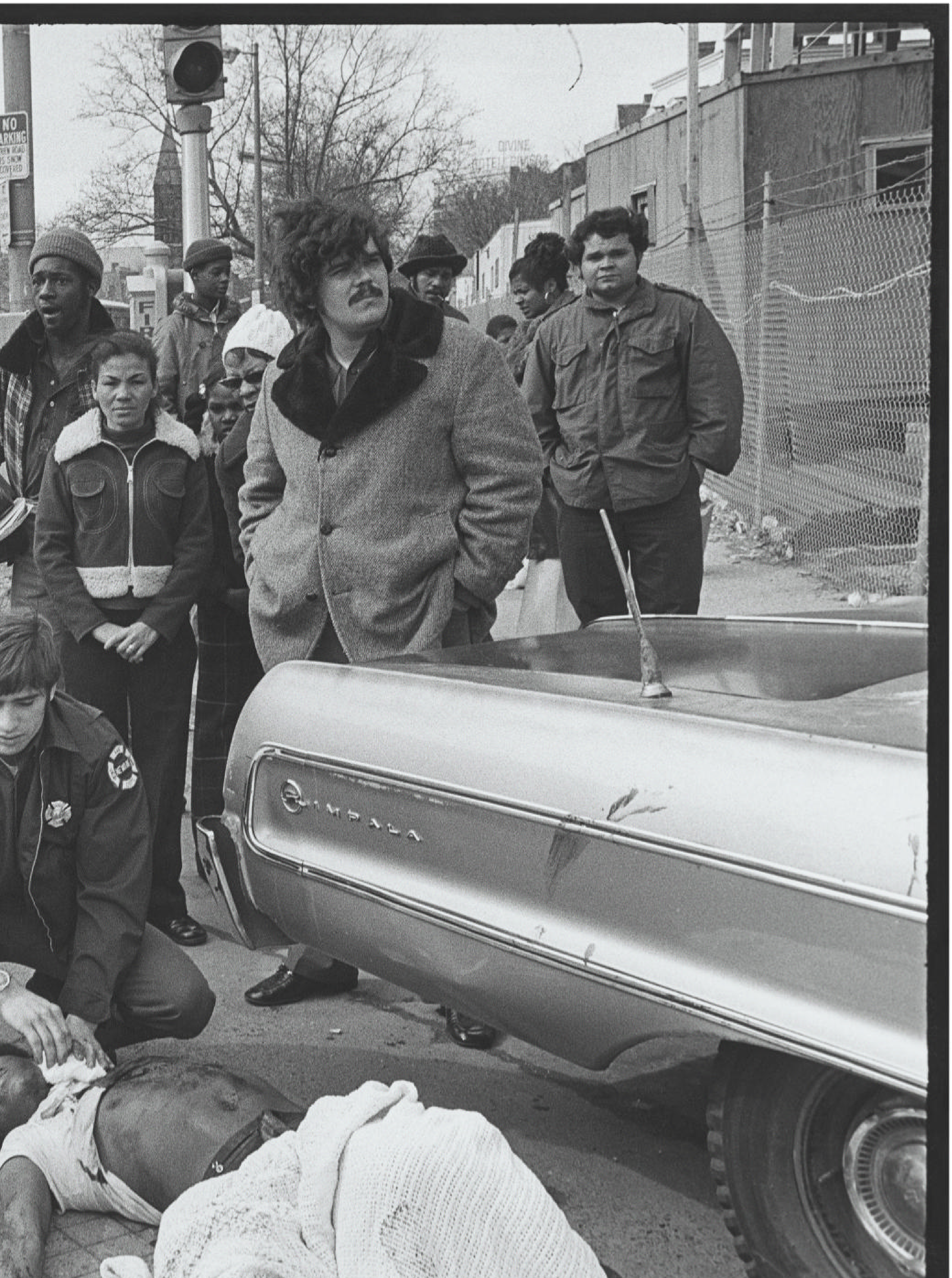
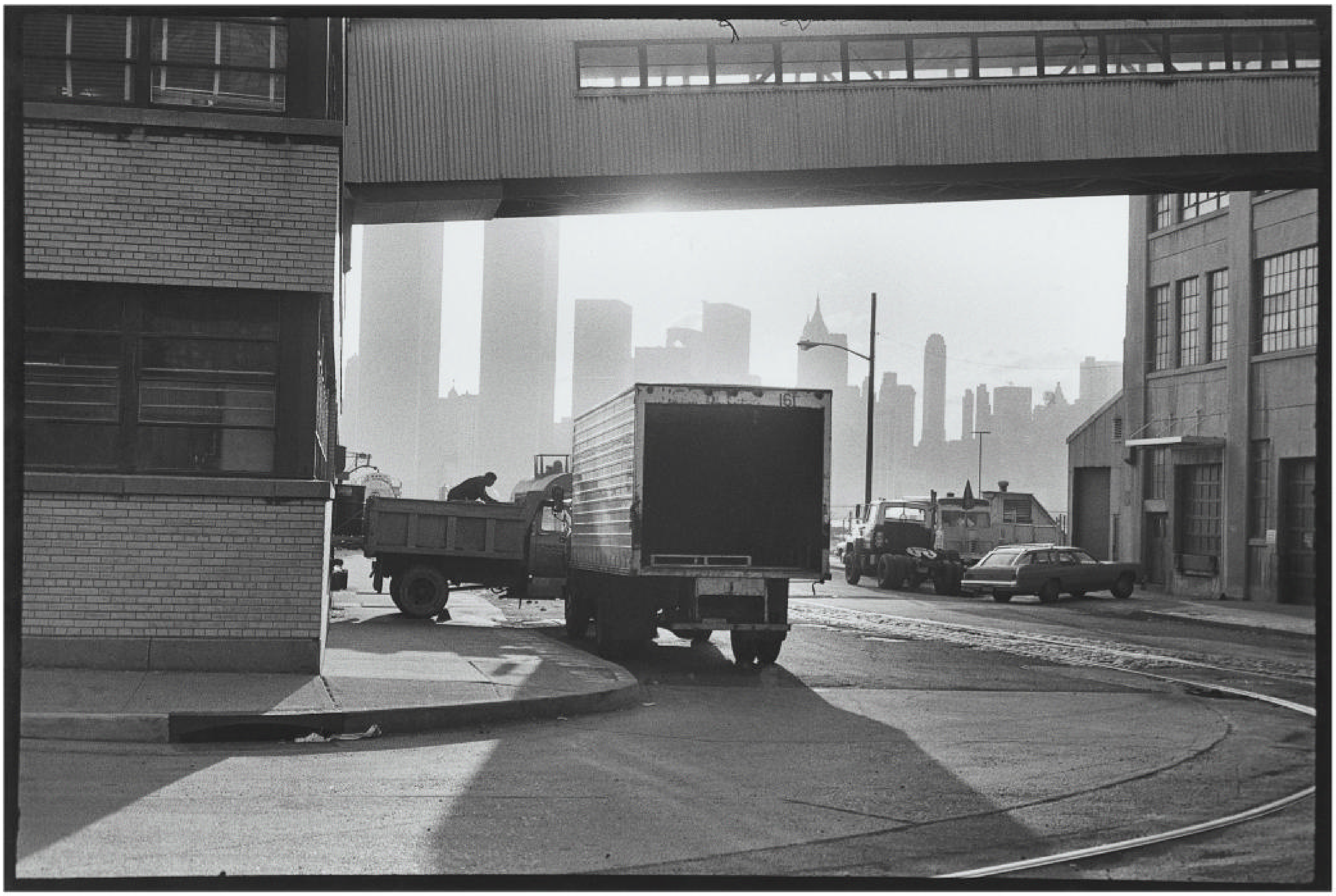


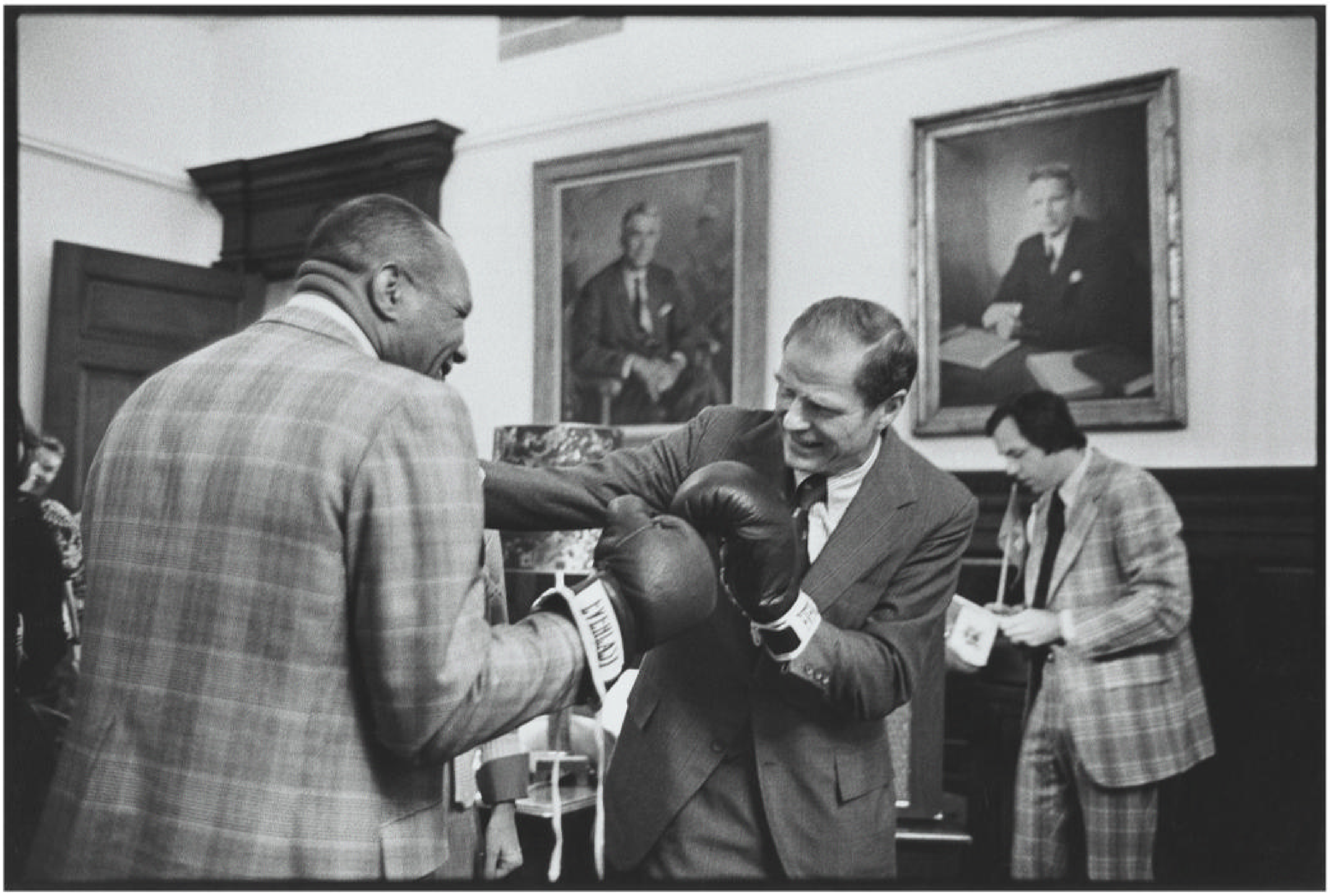
The Newark Fire Department's ambulance corps took Cartier-Bresson to violent scenes, such as this stabbing. He never spoke


NO PARKING
IMPALA

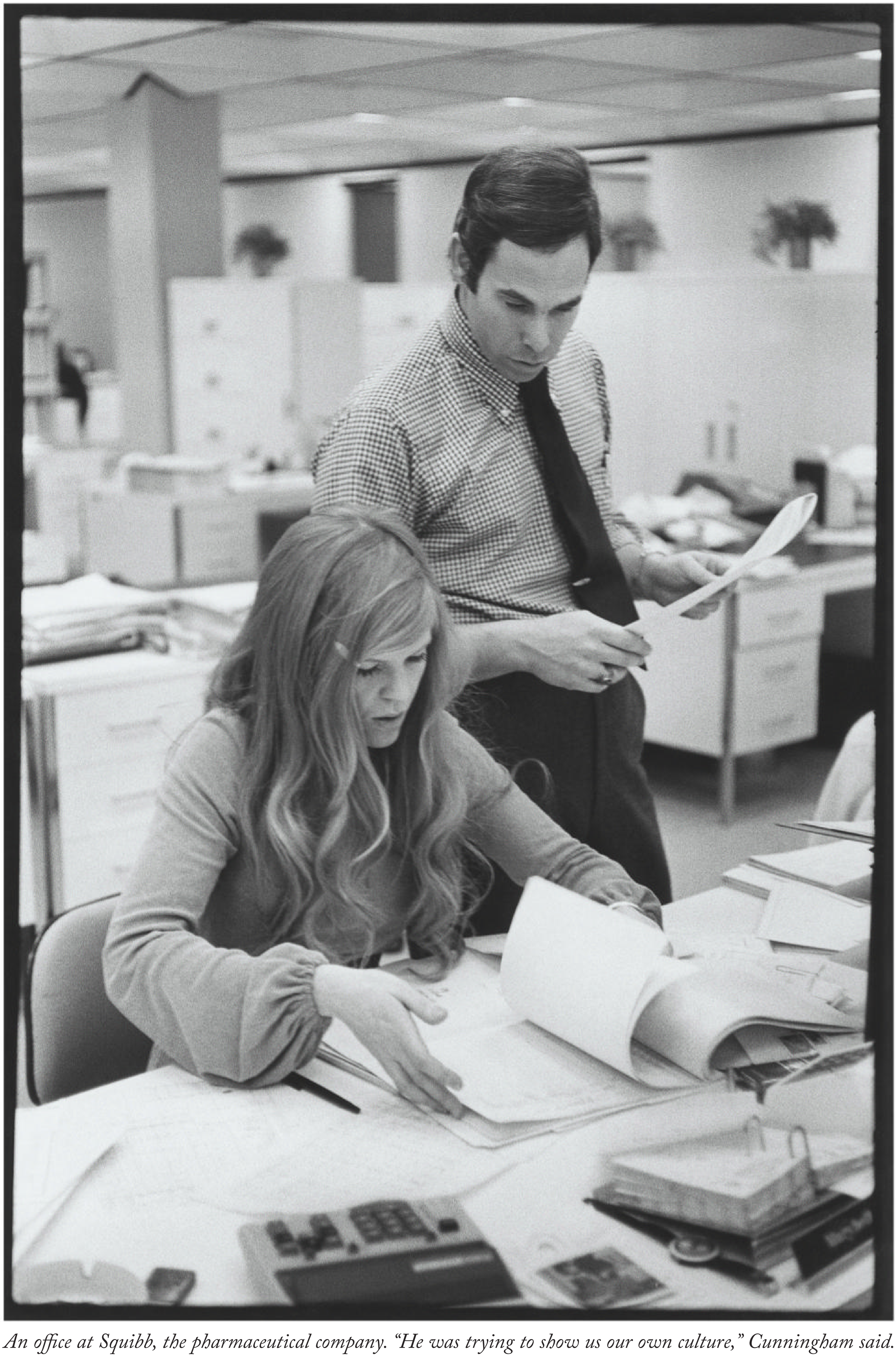
as he worked, hoping to remain unnoticed. It was Cunningham's job to engage—or distract.



On the first day of shooting, the photographer and his assistant emerged from the Holland Tunnel just after sunrise.

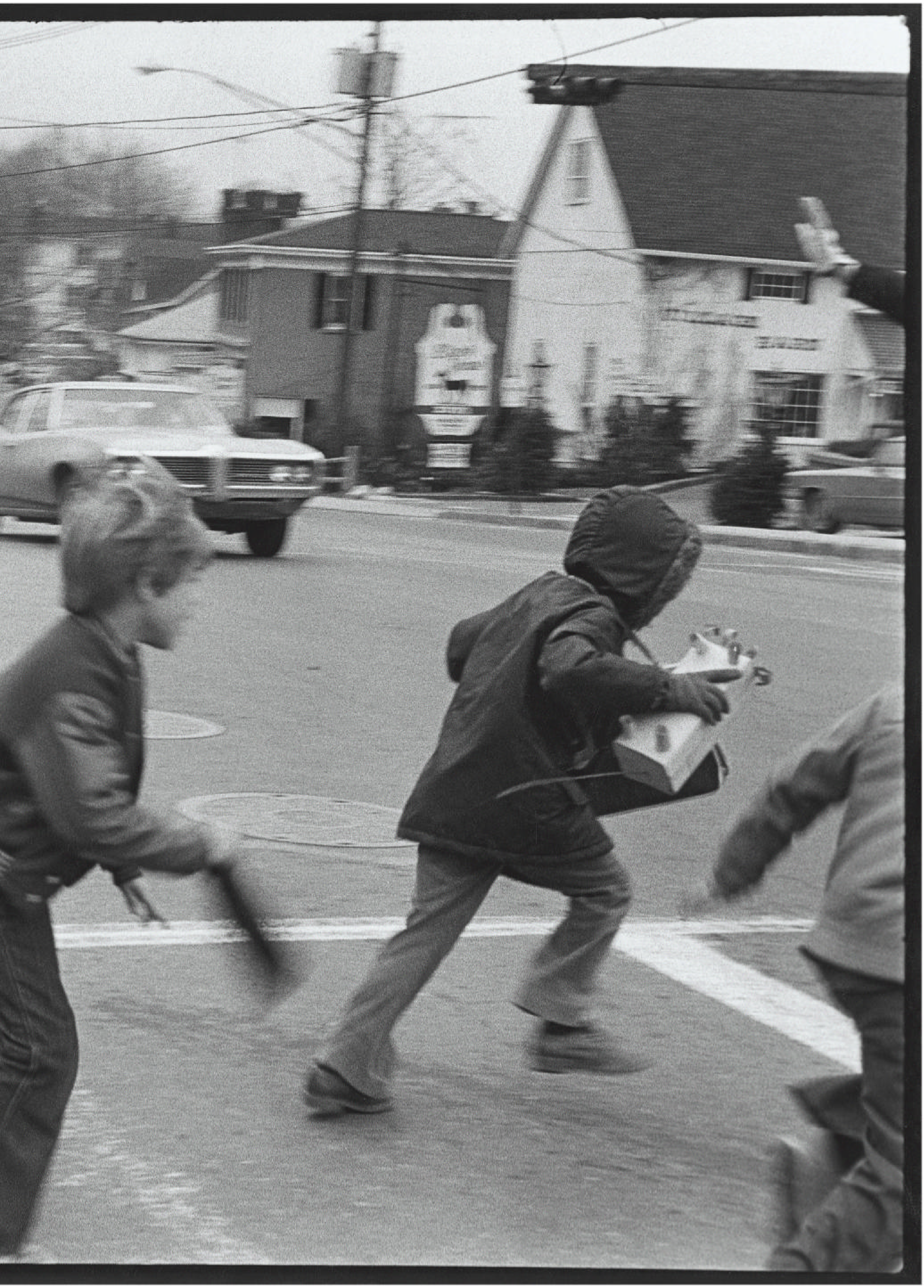


In Trenton, Cartier-Bresson encountered Governor Brendan Byrne with Jersey Joe Walcott, a onetime boxer and sheriff.



An office at Squibb, the pharmaceutical company. "He was trying to show us our own culture," Cunningham said.

Evans, the project's producer, sought an itinerary that showed everyday life in America, including this suburban morning in



Mendham. "You see all the tensions in New Jersey," Cartier-Bresson said. "It's a kind of shortcut through America."

FICTION

MARIANA ENRIQUEZ

MY SAD DEAD

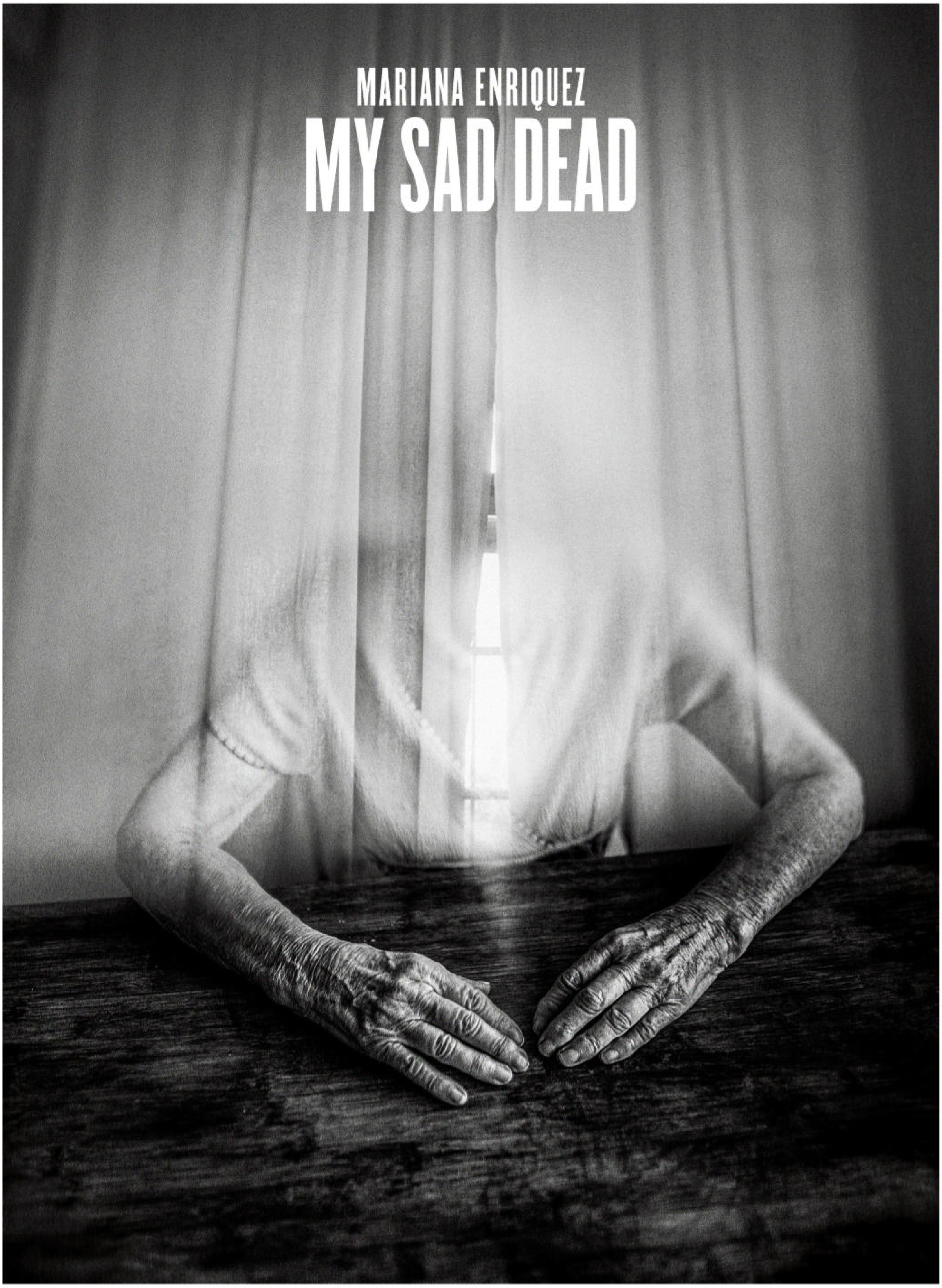


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SILVIA GRAV

First, I think I should describe the neighborhood. Because my house is in the neighborhood, and my mother is in the house, and you can't understand one thing without the other, and you especially can't understand why I don't leave. Because I *could* leave. I could leave tomorrow.

The neighborhood has changed since I was a child. The houses, originally for British railroad workers, were built along these narrow streets back in the twenties: stone houses with lovely little gardens and tall windows with iron shutters. You could say that it was the residents themselves who gradually ruined the houses with all their innovating: the air-conditioning units, the tiled roofs, upper stories tacked on using different materials, exterior facings and paint jobs in ridiculous colors, original wooden doors replaced with cheaper knockoffs. But it wasn't just the residents' poor taste; the neighborhood suffered because it became an island. It's bordered on the west by the avenue, which is like an ugly river we have to ford, with nothing much along its shores. To the south there are housing projects that have grown ever more dangerous, with kids selling crack in stairwells and sometimes pulling guns on one another when they fight, or firing bullets into the air if they're mad after losing a soccer game. To the north is a tract of land that was supposed to be developed into some kind of sports field, but instead it was occupied by the very poor, who have built houses there, the best ones made of concrete blocks, the most precarious of tin and cardboard. The housing projects and this slum merge to the east of our neighborhood.

I understand how things go: if misery is stalking you—as it always is in my country and in my city—and you have to resort to crime in order to survive, then that's what you do. There's more money in crime than in legitimate work. In any case, there isn't much legitimate work available, not for anyone. And if living a better life entails risk, well, it's a risk that many people are willing to take.

Few of my neighbors—the inhabitants of this island of little houses built when the world was different—think the way I do. I want to be clear: I get scared sometimes, too. I don't want a stray bullet to hit me or my daughter when she (rarely) comes to visit. I don't want to be regularly robbed at the bus stop or whenever I'm in a car waiting at a red light on the corner by the projects. I, too, go home crying when a teen-ager pulls a knife on me and snatches my phone. But I don't want to kill them all. I don't believe they're a bunch of freeloaders and immigrants and miscreants and deadbeats, all expendable and unsalvageable. My ex-husband, who works at an oil company and lives in Patagonia, tells me that the neighbors are just afraid. I tell him that fascism generally starts with fear and turns into hatred. He tells me that I should sell the house and move to the South to be closer to him. We're divorced, but we're friends. We've always been friends. His new wife is delightful. I tend to use our daughter, Carolina, as an excuse for staying here, but it's just an excuse. Carolina lives far away from me and this house, and she works as a fashion editor at a glossy magazine. She doesn't need me.

I stay because my mother lives here. Can I say that about a dead woman? She's *present*, then. Ever since she first appeared to me, I've understood that word better. She was here, she occupied a physical space, and I sensed her presence before I could see her.

My mother was a happy woman until she got cancer and came home to die. Her agony was long, painful, and undignified. It's not always like that. The wise patient with a bald head and yellowed skin who sits in bed imparting life lessons is a ridiculous romanticization, but it's true that there are people who suffer less. It's a matter of physiology, and also one of temperament. My mother was allergic to morphine. She couldn't use it. We had to resort to other, impotent painkillers. She died screaming. A nurse and I cared for her as best we could. We couldn't do much. I'm a doctor, but I haven't worked with patients in a long time; instead, I do administrative work at a private medical company. At sixty, I don't have the energy, patience, or passion for hospital work anymore. Also, to tell the truth, for a long time I denied (denial is a powerful drug) a fact I finally had to come to terms with when my mother appeared. Namely, that ghosts exist, and I can see them. Though they seek me out, I'm not the only one who sees them; in the hospital, the nurses used to go running. I tried to reassure them, saying, "Girls, you're imagining things."

It was morning when I first heard my mother scream. Not the wee morning hours under the cover of night but the full-on sunlight of day, so ill-suited to haunting. The houses in the area, though very pretty, are built close together in a semidetached style, and noise carries. My next-door neighbor Mari, who hardly ever leaves her house, because she's terrified she'll be robbed and murdered and who knows what other phobic fantasies, leaned wide-eyed out her window that looks into my little front yard just as I was going out to see if there was someone in the street. It was a stupid, knee-jerk reaction driven by my own panic: I couldn't believe that I was hearing my dead mother's cries, and I thought maybe it was someone outside. An accident, a fight. Mari remembered my mother's real screams, too, and she was shocked and dumbfounded.

"It's the TV, Mari. It's O.K.," I told her.

"It's just, you realize what it sounds like, Doctor?"

"It really does. I can't believe it."

And I went back inside.

Since I didn't know what to do, I started looking around the house for the source of the cries, and asking my mother, as if I were praying, to be quieter. I didn't urge her to stop wailing entirely—just a little discretion, that was all I asked for. I'd made the same request of other ghosts, first at the hospital and later on at a clinic. Sometimes it worked. My mother always had a sense of humor, and my appeal to turn down the volume made her laugh. I didn't find her that day—which I took off from work—but I did that night, sitting on the floor of the room where she'd died, which was now a storage room for furniture I never took the time to toss or give away. She was thin, but the way she'd been at the beginning of her cancer, not the brittle and feverish wraith of her final months. I didn't dare approach; leaning in the doorway, my knees shaking, I sang to her. And as I sang I sank down until we were seated face to face, me with my legs crossed, her kneeling. I sang the same song that had soothed her when her pain became unbearable, or so I chose to think. That night, she didn't scream.

But ghosts, I've learned, get upset. I

don't know what they think, if they think at all—it's more like they reflexively repeat things—but they do talk and voice opinions and have bad moods. My mother wanders the house. Sometimes she seems to know I'm there, and other times she doesn't. Sometimes it seems that the fury returns to her, the fury of her degraded body, her colostomy bag, the humiliation; she used to be so elegant, and I remember how she cried, "The smell, the smell!" It was worse than the physical suffering. At those times, when the anger returns, she produces screams of pure rage. I have several ways of calming her down, but there's no reason to go into them here.

The interesting thing was what started to happen in the neighborhood. Eventually, I realized that I wasn't crazy—I'd considered the possibility, as anyone would after seeing her dead mother climbing the stairs—and I also realized that my mother wasn't the only ghost.

My neighbors have "safety" meetings. They don't accomplish much. There have been break-ins around the neighborhood, some violent muggings, an old lady beaten. It's awful. But the neighbors are even worse. They go to those meetings and yell about how they pay their taxes (which is only partly true—they evade everything they can, like most middle-class Argentineans) and how they've bought guns and are taking classes in how to use them. And they describe the actions they think the police should take: humiliation, medieval torture, an eye for an eye, that kind of thing, even execution. There's one man I don't know, a little older than me, who declares that the police should display the heads of these "illegals" on stakes, as in colonial days. The others don't contradict him; they don't even roll their eyes. All the meetings end with them recalling their grandparents, such good people, those European immigrants who arrived with nothing but the shirts on their backs, who came to find honest work, who were poor but dignified, who were white. Just another myth. The immigrants of that era were, in many cases, petty thieves; others were anarchists running from the police, and most of them became dishonest traders who prioritized earning money over assuming any kind of ethical responsibility. But I don't argue anymore, if I ever did. I'm resigned to that world view they all share. It's a lie, but arguing against a credible lie is a task for titans.

I go to the meetings because I want to know what they're planning. I want to know beforehand if they're going to close off the street, for example. One time, they installed an alarm system unbeknownst to me, and I accidentally set it off when I leaned against a door to check my phone messages. They also mounted a camera on my house without my permission, but I have to admit the thing has been helpful. At least it lets me see if someone is trying to pick the lock, which has already happened, in fact, several times. The camera is broken now, and I haven't found the time to fix it. I can just hear my daughter's voice: "Mom, your stubbornness is going to get you murdered. One day I'm going to find you lying dead. I hope you've saved money for my therapy, because I'm not spending mine."

The emergency meeting they called in mid-July was a real shit show. A horrible thing had happened, and the neighborhood was full of TV cameras, from the regular stations and from cable and every other kind of media. Three girls had been coming back from a party in the early morning. They had to walk through our neighborhood to reach the projects, and someone shot them from a car. They didn't even have time to run. They died in the street. They were young, all three of them fifteen years old. They'd been walking along holding hands, huddling over a phone to look at messages. And that's how they appear in the newspaper photograph: huddled together but fallen, one on top of the other, with their cropped shirts exposing their flat stomachs, their leggings bloodied, and their tennis shoes brand-new. One girl's face was destroyed by the bullets, and what remained of her eyes stared up at the treetops. The others, beneath her, bled to death right there. The identity of the murderers was still unknown when the neighborhood meeting was called, but it was clear enough to us what had happened: one of the girls must have been the daughter or relative of a criminal, an asphalt pirate, a mini-narco—there are no big narcos in my country—or a pimp. That person had offended someone or owed money: it was revenge. As the days passed, this theory was confirmed. A yellow police cordon blocked off the corner where the girls had been killed, but all around it people left bouquets of flowers, cardboard hearts, and Teddy bears, a street-side grave with offerings more appropriate to little girls than to teen-agers.

I saw them one day at dusk as I was returning from work. My taxi dropped me off right at the corner with the police cordon and the tributes to the girls: "Lu, we love you always!!!!!!" "Justice for Natalia." "My little angel, you were gone too soon." They were taking photos as they walked: the three heads close together so they'd fit into the image, the pierced tongues sticking out (why do girls like to stick out their tongues so much?); a second round of pictures with duck-bill lips, that premature, faked sensuality. It had seemed especially grotesque in the real photographs of the girls that had appeared with the newspaper articles, pictures that had been posted on Instagram and Snapchat, as my daughter explained to me. I didn't understand the dog noses and bunny ears in those images, and then I found out that they were "filters."

The ghost girls were laughing as they walked. At that hour, almost nighttime, my neighborhood is deserted. "The night is dark and full of terrors," says a priestess in the epic series that my daughter watches with true fanatical madness, and that I can't get into because it has too many characters (though its violence, which other people find disturbing, doesn't bother me). The ghost girls couldn't get the flash to work, and that made them laugh harder. They were incredibly compact—there's no other way to put it. They seemed like living girls doing the things that fifteen-year-olds do: oblivious of what's happening around them, wearing clothes a size or two too small for their bodies, their hair dyed and colorful, a jostling whirlwind of blue, green, and black streaks. The neighborhood's windows opened timidly, and the silence rang out like a gunshot. Someone in a house gave a stifled cry as the girls went past. They were about fifty metres from me, but I could already see them clearly, and I understood. One of them was bleeding from the neck. The blood flowed slowly down, and she wiped it away distractedly, as if it were rainwater or beer that some clumsy boy had spilled on her at a party. Another girl, the one whose face was destroyed, was taking photos unconcernedly, and the smallest one, skinny to the point of illness, had three red holes in her abdomen. I didn't want to look anymore; they reminded me of my mother when she had cancer, her moribund thinness.

Then the girls started to look at the photos they had taken. And what they saw made them cry. "No, no, no," they said and shook their heads, and they looked at one another, looked at the photos, and saw the purplish green of putrefaction, and the blood, dried and fresh, the bullet wounds baring white bone, the blind eyes. The photos broke the spell of friendship and immortality. Then they started to run. The ghost girls ran in desperate circles, and their wailing was truly terrifying, their confused desperation. Had they only just realized that they were dead? How unfair; usually the dead have the good fortune not to see themselves decompose, even when they return as ghosts. My mother, for example: her image doesn't decay. But ghosts take different forms. I wonder if the shapes they take are determined by the dead people themselves or by those of us who see them—if those images are perhaps a collective construction.

The neighbors started to scream, too. It was madness. I heard a voice shout that someone had fainted and needed an ambulance, but who was going to call it with the girls right there, rotting in the lovely golden twilight? One of them, the one with blood running down her neck—the bullet had hit an artery—reminded me of Carolina. I don't know why. It wasn't her clothes, exactly: this girl wore the kind of cheap shirt and leggings you can buy in the neighborhood, maybe even at the supermarket. But there was something in the way she wore all that cheapness that reminded me of my daughter's unexpected flair. (I say "unexpected" because I certainly don't have the gift of knowing which color goes with which, or what pants can make my legs look longer.) Yes, the girl's leggings were cheap, made of black Lycra, but her white shirt draped prettily over her buttocks, just so, and, with some bulky sneakers that were possibly men's, the outfit gave her a style—urban chic, my daughter would say—that was very particular. Her shoes were a brash royal blue, and around her bloody neck hung a little chain with a Victorian pendant that added an ironic touch to the street style. As I describe her, I believe I'm imitating my daughter, who always adds a brief explanatory note to her fashion layouts. In any case, maybe because that girl made me think of Carolina she was the one I approached.

Of course I was scared, my heartbeat reverberating in the pit of my stomach. And I'm no longer of the age for that kind of fright: I'm at risk for an arrhythmia, or even angina. Also, the neighbors were watching. But I couldn't just leave the girls like that. Did I know I would be able to calm them? I knew. One just knows these things. In the hospital, when I pacified my first ghosts more than ten years ago now—I knew then, too. But at the hospital there were too many of them, and it was too much for me. Hysteria is contagious among spirits as well as humans. Of course, the phenomenon will never be studied—no one would believe it. I'm embarrassed myself. I think about this thing I do and I'm reminded of those cable series, disgraceful, false productions about Hollywood mediums and ghost hunters. Programs spawned by the crisis of ideas and by the economic crisis, made with bad actors and worse scripts, all identical, all ignorant, not even entertaining. That's not what I am, I tell myself, but I am also that, in a way.

I called the girls by their names, which was enough to get them to look at me, but not enough to stop them from screaming. For that, I had to talk to them. Ask them to delete the photos. It was hard for them to obey; it always is. And then I had to ask them to move on. Make them laugh a little. Talk to them about clothes. Ask them about the party they were coming from. Never mention the murder. They wailed a little more when they saw the memorial and the police tape, but soon the moans faded to whimpers and hugs, self-pitying tears, until finally the girls, too, disappeared, or, more accurately, they dissolved. Their images evaporated into the air like alcohol.

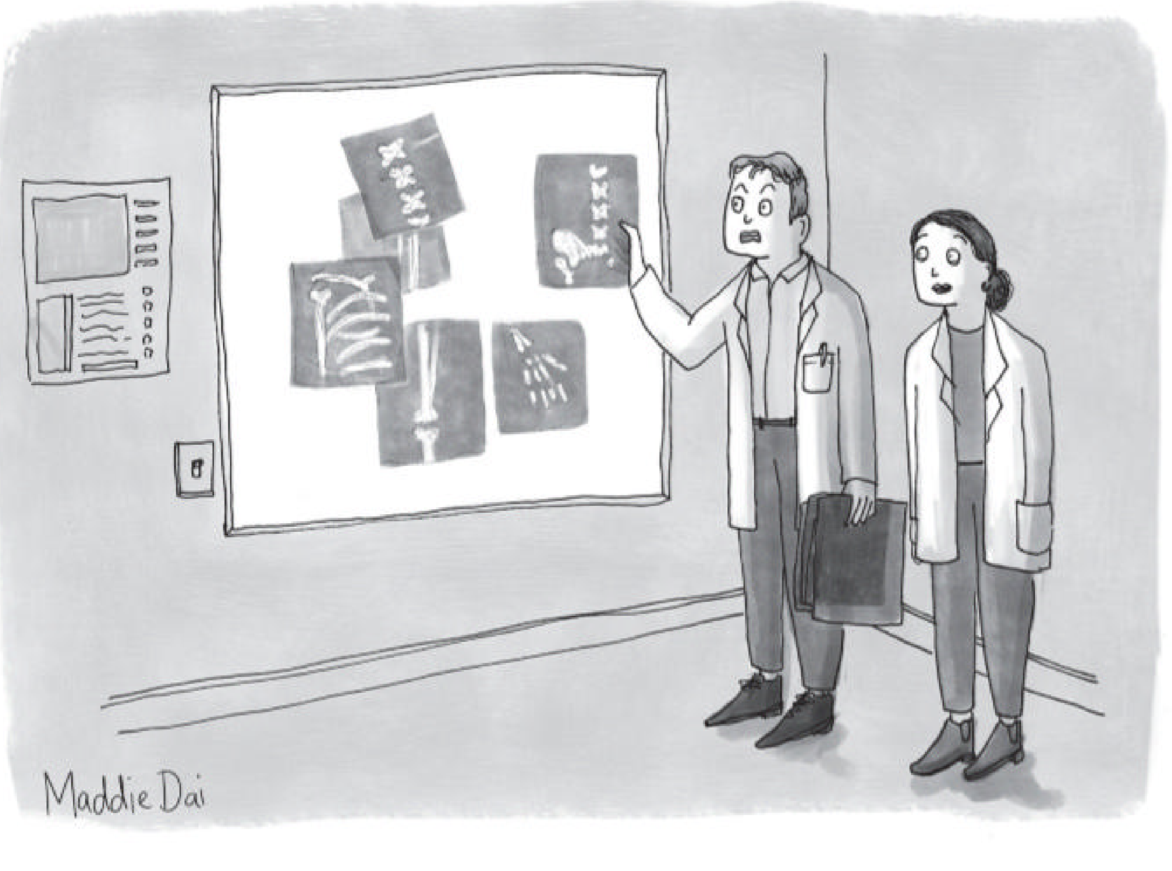
I had to sit down by the cordon for a second. Soon my neighbor Julio came out. Julio is very friendly; he used to have a lovely corner bar in the neighborhood, but couldn't keep up the rent on the place. The drinks and food were too expensive and the customers too few, and, in sum, it was the same old story of restaurants and bars that go broke. It made me infinitely sad, and that was why I felt a greater affection for Julio than he perhaps deserved.

"What did you do, Doctor?"

"It's Emma, Julio. Call me Emma, please."

"What did you do, Emma?"

The question was repeated for weeks. There were semi-secret meetings among those who had seen what happened. Then the gatherings broadened to include those



"The sooner I put these all together, the sooner I find out what the hell is wrong with this man."

who hadn't witnessed it firsthand. Needless to say, there was a whole lot of distrust and incredulity. They wore me down. I told them about my mother. Mari vouched for my story, but scolded me for lying to her that time I'd said the screams were on TV.

"Mari, what did you want me to say? I was scared, too. I thought I was crazy."

That's not true, not entirely. A person knows when she's going crazy; it doesn't happen overnight, not even after a trauma. Everything, everything in the body is a process. Death, too.

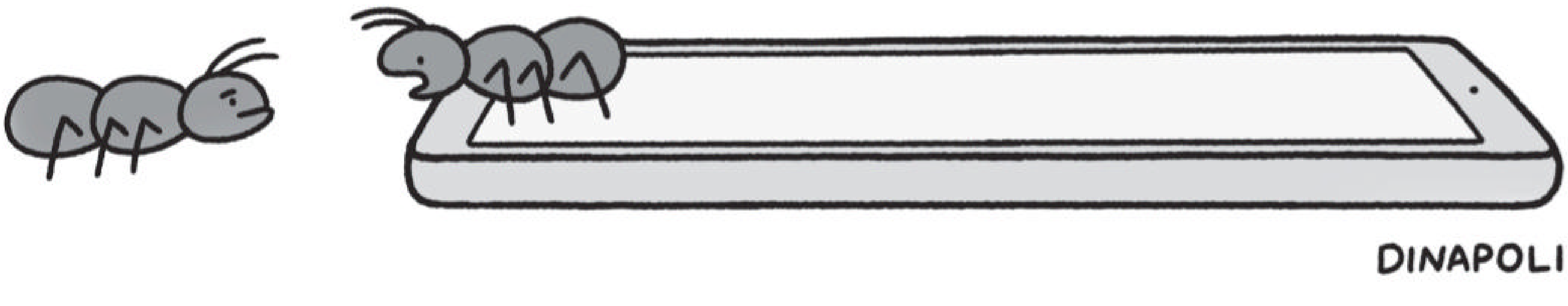
The neighbors started coming to see me in secret. Ashamed. The epidemic of ghosts—because that's what it was—coincided with the neighborhood's worst period. Whoever had ordered the hit on the three teen-agers was now running everything in the housing projects, and the muggings soon escalated to kidnapping. A particular kind of kidnapping they call "express." The kidnappers pull their victims into a car and take them around to A.T.M.s until they have withdrawn an amount the thieves deem acceptable. Sometimes these express kidnappings end in violence—beatings, rapes, shootings—owing to an incredible misunderstanding. The thieves—who are, for the most part, very young men—don't have jobs, so they don't have bank accounts. They don't know that some banks in Argentina let you withdraw only small amounts from A.T.M.s, maybe fifteen hundred pesos a day, or double that if you're a customer of the bank. If you have multiple accounts, you can get more cash by withdrawing from them all. But if not, well, you can't get much. The thieves, those frightened and agitated boys, want more. And they think that they're being lied to. That their victims are looking down on them and trying to cheat them. "You think I'm some kind of dumbass, huh? I'll show you." And then the punch, the gun butt to the face, the panic. They haven't done it to me yet, but it happens a lot, and it happens to people who live in the projects, too. I'm clarifying because I don't want to be unfair—not everyone in the projects is a criminal, of course. There are a lot of people who have an apartment there just as I have a house here, and they can't or don't want to move, and that's it.

When the first neighbor came, I was chatting with Mom. Sometimes I talk to her. She's there, after all, and although she doesn't talk, she looks at me, and sometimes she nods. If she's not in a rage, she laughs. It's a shame she doesn't talk; we'd have more fun if she did. I don't invite my girlfriends over anymore because Mom might appear to them. My daughter comes less and less, but that's not her fault—she has a lot of work. In this country, she has to make the most of it: you never know how long a job will last, whether you're about to be fired or not—the order to cut back on personnel can come suddenly, and you can wait years to find another job. Best to prepare for that wait with a good nest egg. She and I talk on the phone and chat online. She doesn't know about her grandmother. I could tell her, but why? For now, there's no need.

Paulo was the first of the neighbors to visit me. He has two little girls, both in grade school. His wife "suffers from nerves"—that is, she has panic attacks. Paulo has a brother in the United States, and at the neighborhood meetings he goes on and on about how well people live there, what a safe country it is. I don't correct him. As I said, I don't participate that way; I don't like to argue. Paulo beat around the bush a lot before finally telling me his problem. He even asked if he could smoke, and seemed surprised when I gave him permission. To ease the tension, I told him, "You know, most doctors smoke. Too much stress."

Paulo's problem, then: three months before, a burglar had tried to break into his house. From the roof. He knew the guy was a thief because he was carrying a small handgun, a .22. When Paulo saw the intruder, he locked his wife and daughters in a room and got a hammer—he wasn't one of the people who'd bought a weapon—and started to dial the police. Then, through the second-floor window, he saw the thief slip and fall from the roof to the patio below. When he told me this, I remembered the incident. It had been a subject of conversation at one of the neighborhood meetings, the one where my neighbors had decided to request more of a police presence from the Ninth Precinct. The thief had died from the fall. I didn't ask Paulo if he'd let him die, but I think that's what happened. It's possible that the man could have survived if the ambulance had arrived in time. I can imagine Paulo, hammer in hand, watching from the window as he died, feeling like a small-time god with the power to decide another man's fate. Would I have done the same thing if my family had been threatened? Maybe. It's easy to have ethics when what you love is not in danger. I like to think that I wouldn't have done it, though. I guess I'm a self-righteous person—I prefer naïveté and paternalism to hatred.

However it happened, the thief came back. Paulo's wife heard him walking on the roof. Paulo didn't believe her. After all, she suffered from nerves, poor thing. Until he heard the footsteps himself. And he saw the burglar fall to the patio again.

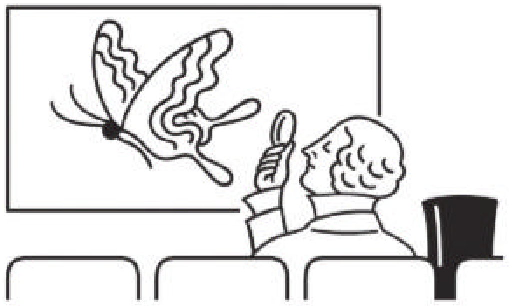


"It says it's a four-minute drive or a two-hundred-and-seven-day walk."

Soundlessly. That's what his ghost thief does: walks and falls, walks and falls. Paulo told me that, once on the ground, "he laughs his ass off at us." I agreed to go over there one night. The wife took the opportunity to show me the medication she'd been prescribed. Generally speaking, it seemed like too much, but I know that doctors nowadays would rather prescribe extra than do a more comprehensive treatment. Paulo and his wife invited me to have dinner with them—hot dogs with mashed potatoes ("For the girls," the mother told me, "they won't eat anything else")—but I'd already eaten at home. I waited. The footsteps came after the kids were in bed, fortunately. I decided that my work would begin after the ghost had fallen—once he'd finished his nightly rounds.

It took only a few minutes to dissuade him. It doesn't matter what I said or what I did: there's a moment when it all becomes very mechanical. This was my third encounter with an uneasy neighborhood ghost, but really I'd calmed the others—my mother and the murdered girls—many times. I don't send the ghosts anywhere, nowhere good or bad. There's no peace or closure. There's no reconciliation. No passage to the other side. All of that is fiction. I just soothe them and keep them from re-offending so often that they make life unbearable for the living. But they do come back eventually; it's as if they forget, and we have to start all over again. Why is that? I remember how, when my husband and I were newlyweds, we had a beautiful cat, all white with a black nose, who always seemed surprised on weekends when we spoiled her with a special can of tuna. When I wondered if maybe she had some kind of memory problem, my husband said, "No, it's just that she has a tiny brain. Don't you see how small her head is?" But her face was so intelligent! And ghosts are a little like that. They seem human, they seem intelligent, but they're really just a sliver of a person that is compelled to repeat itself. They don't have brains, but they do have something that thinks, so to speak. It's just that it's as small as that of my cat, whose name was Florencia and who used to purr every night between my husband and me before we went to sleep. I miss my husband, but not as a husband. I miss his friendship, his conversation, his food. (He's an excellent cook.) But he needs to fall in love and care for someone, and I need to be alone.

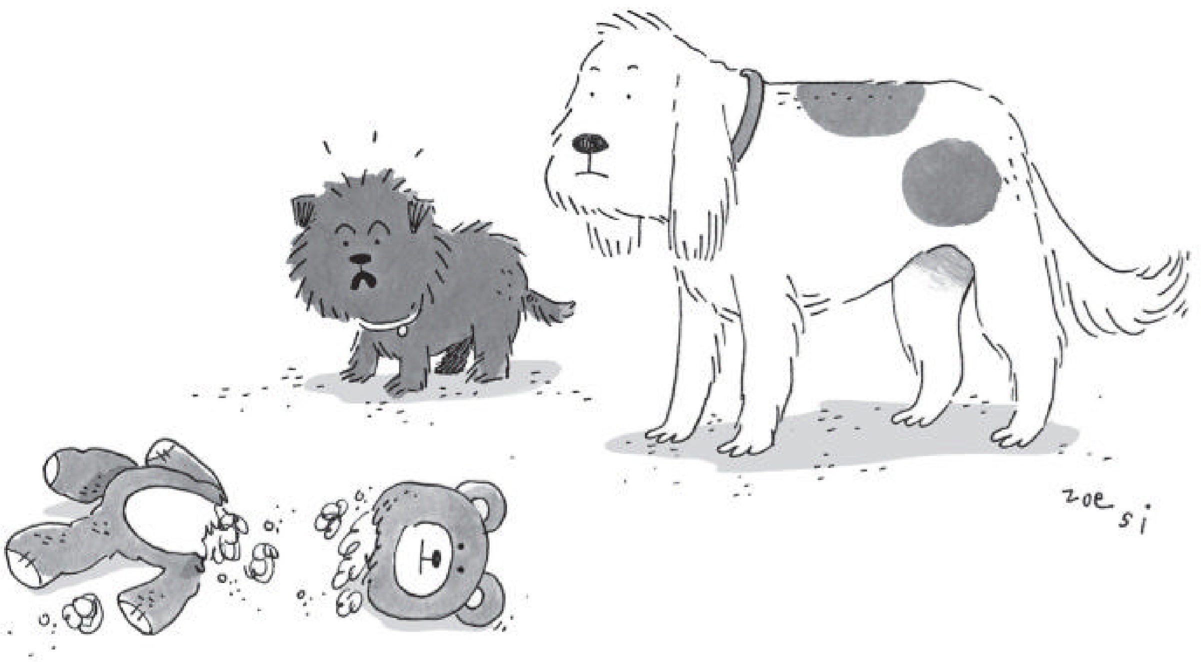
After the ghost of the thief, others came. "Why this invasion?" I asked my mother once, and she seemed to listen attentively. She didn't answer me, she can't, but I knew the answer: it wasn't the neighborhood that was being invaded. It was me. I was attracting them. That was why it didn't make sense for me to leave, unless I learned how to rid myself of that magnetism. But, in truth, it didn't bother me. The fear very soon became adrenaline. When many days passed without a neighbor knocking at my door, I started to get impatient. But there was one ghost in particular that is important to this story, one with whom I behaved differently. One I couldn't or didn't want to help. Or is it the neighbors I help? The two things are intertwined.



My daughter's birthday is December 23rd. That year, maybe because we hadn't seen each other much, she invited me to her more "intimate" party. (She'd had another, with friends and acquaintances, the weekend before; she isn't superstitious and doesn't mind celebrating in advance.) She also invited me to stay and spend Christmas and even New Year's with her, if I wanted to, at her house in Palermo. I knew I would be invited to New Year's parties, so I said no to that, but I agreed to stay for Christmas and a few days more. I left my house carrying a bag, and I went by taxi, because I'd long since sold my car. I'm not that old, but neither am I young enough to drive as attentively as Buenos Aires demands. The days I spent with my daughter were very good. We didn't fight much, and we laughed a lot. We watched her epic series, and I fell half in love with Ned Stark, the kind of man I'd never had, with a square jaw and a back like a wild animal's. Plus, the actor wasn't all that much younger than me—maybe ten years, I figured. One night, when we opened a bottle of white wine and drank it very cold, ideal for the city's humid heat and stifling air, I almost told her about the spiritualist talent I'd acquired in old age. But I was afraid of ruining a visit that was nearly perfect. She'd have every right to think I was demented. I went home on the afternoon of the 29th, by subway, because crossing the city above ground would have been an absurd proposition. In addition to the usual end-of-year protests, there were several others: state workers striking for raises; picketers blocking off streets, demanding bags of food; laid-off workers demonstrating in front of the Labor Ministry, demanding to be rehired; and a huge march in front of Congress, calling for stronger public-safety measures.

A youth had been murdered: seventeen years old, a Matías with an Italian last name. He'd been kidnapped. An express kidnapping, but the boy was a minor and didn't have an A.T.M. card, so his captors had changed their plan and decided to ask his family for money. The family didn't have money. That night, the kidnappers still had him in their car—they must not have known where to take him—and the boy escaped. He didn't get far. His captors shot him in the slum that borders our neighborhood to the north, the one that was supposed to become a sports field, then became a vacant lot, and is now full of squatters. The authorities are constantly threatening to evict those people, but they probably never will. Where would they put them all? Plus, some of the little houses are now built with better materials and have a second story. Not long ago, on my way to buy food, I saw that a news kiosk and an ice-cream shop had opened there. The police arrested a few suspects from the slum, but apparently the kidnappers weren't from there. People on TV were calling for the death penalty, as they always do in my country when a terrible murder is committed.

Strangely, and in spite of the fact that the crime had happened so close by, my neighbors didn't call an emergency meeting. I waited for it for a few days—a phone message, or a piece of paper stuck to my door with Scotch Tape—but there was only silence, a sideways glance in the grocery store, a certain hurry as cigarettes were purchased at the kiosk. I attributed it to nerves, though this tense reticence



"He continues to taunt me. Frankly, I don't know what else can be done."

was not my neighbors' usual reaction; they tended more toward exaggerated anxiety shouted at the top of their lungs.

The knocks at my door woke me up. It was late, I knew without looking at the clock; I've gone to bed in the early morning since I was young, a habit from being on call that I could never shake. It was a gentle knocking: someone was outside. I decided to ignore it. But the sound continued, rhythmic, insistent, growing in urgency until I realized that the person was now pounding with both fists, as if to break down the door. I was scared. I thought about locking my bedroom door, but, of course, that door didn't lock. What could I put between me and whoever it was who wanted to get in? Should I call Mari? The police? I sat up in bed, and, when I heard the whispering, the sweat on my hands went cold, but at the same time I felt calmer: it wasn't a real person pounding. His low voice, his pleading, wouldn't have reached me from the front door. "Please, open up," he was saying. He spoke respectfully, using the formal *usted*. "Please, they're after me. I don't want to rob you—I'm not a thief. They kidnapped me! Please let me in or they'll kill me, they'll kill me!"

I went running down the stairs and looked out the window. The boy was on the sidewalk. A tall teen-ager, very visible under the street light. He was pale like all dead people, but I couldn't see his wounds, even though he was dressed for summer in a white T-shirt, soccer shorts, running shoes. Where had he been shot? I couldn't remember. During the days I'd spent with my daughter, I'd been happily disconnected from the news and TV. So here was Matías with the Italian last name, murdered just blocks from my house, and I didn't know exactly how he'd died or why he was knocking at my door.

But I could guess. Was my neighbors' silence related to this apparition? Of course it was, I told myself. And in more ways than one.

The teen-age Matías stopped beating on the door when he saw me. He approached the window, and his eyes—alive, totally alive, insect-like, with the buzzing shine of beetles—held vengeance and rage. I wasn't afraid of him, because I knew he couldn't take his revenge in the material world, but the frustration of being unable to act added layers to his fury, endless layers. He was going to spend what time he had—and I suspected that Matías with the Italian last name had all the time in the world—running up and down this street. Until the street no longer existed, if necessary. He wasn't going to let the people who had helped to kill him sleep, never, never.

"You're not going to open up?" he asked. His voice was clear, not very different from a living person's. He no longer spoke respectfully.

I went to the door, turned the key, and opened it. Matías stayed in the doorway. Then I saw the hole in his temple. It was subtle, like a mole. It wasn't bleeding. He reminded me of the suicides I used to get at the hospital. Most of them male, most of them his age, not all so precise with the gunshot; they usually destroyed their faces or put the barrel of the gun in their mouths.

"It's too late now," Matías told me.

I knew I couldn't calm him, not this one, and I said in a very loud voice, "I wasn't home that night! You know that. I would have let you in."

"Yeah? I don't believe you," he said.

A conversation. Matías with the Italian last name could have conversations. What made him different from the others? I stayed on the threshold with the door open and the light on and I watched him as he left. He ran from one house to another, knocking; he knocked on every door. First lightly, then with his fists, finally kicking it. He started by politely entreating people to open up, and he ended with insults; in his anger and desperation, he was terrified, but also astonished. My neighbors turned on their lights, but no one opened the door. I heard one man moan.

Matías with the Italian last name went on pounding on doors until the sun came up. Only then did I go back inside. He didn't miss a single house. They all got what they deserved.

I looked up his Italian last name online. Cremonesi. Matías Cremonesi. He'd been in high school, played basketball—of course, given his height—and they'd shot him on a small soccer field in the slum. One of the murderers had been caught. Of course, he said that the other man had wielded the gun and pulled the trigger, and he'd done it only because the boy had seen their faces when he escaped. And they knew each other. This murderer was from the housing projects, and Matías was, too. Why kill a neighbor? The kidnapper, who was nineteen, said again that it hadn't been their intention, that they'd only wanted him to get some money from an A.T.M. "But he said he didn't have a card. We weren't in our right minds."

That day at noon, my neighbor Julio, the one with the failed bar, came to visit. The neighbors had sent Julio because they knew I liked him. He didn't hem and haw like Paulo, the one who'd watched the burglar die. He was direct. He claimed not to feel guilty. Yes, they had all heard the boy that night. Yes, they'd all thought it was a trick, the lie of a cunning thief who wanted to pass himself off as a victim so that he could get into someone's house. Yes, when they'd looked out the window and seen a teen-ager their suspicion had been confirmed—weren't thieves always teen-age boys? "Don't give me that shit about how they're victims, too," he said. "You may think that. All of them victims of society. Stop fucking around, Emma." I hadn't opened my mouth. "You can think that way because they've never really gotten you. But they're not victims of anything." I still hadn't said a word. I understood that he was trying to deal with his guilt.

"How long did he knock on doors?" I wanted to know. "How long did he ask to be let in?"

Beneath the hatred, Matías's ghostly eyes had been imbued with fear, the adrenaline of his final night, when he realized that he would die alone. He'd had to comprehend that no one was going to help him, not even by making a call, that he was surrounded by hoodless executioners, hiding behind the façade of a middle-class, respectable neighborhood.

Julio didn't want to answer. He said he didn't know. "A while. Does it matter?"

"It matters," I told him. "Because the boy is furious. And what am I going to tell him so that he'll leave us in peace? That we were wrong? It's not enough."

"You have to try."

"No," I replied. "I don't know how."

"You don't want to. You think you're better than us. You wouldn't have let him in, either!"

"That's what Matías told me last night."

"Don't use his name."

"Why not? He has a name."

"And how are we going to sleep? What about the children?"

"Julio, you all should have thought of that sooner. Buy some sleeping pills. I can prescribe them. It's a very fine medicine, no side effects."

Confounded, Julio pounded the table.

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Not at all. But I'm no one's servant. And you can stop yelling at me in my own house. It's not the best way to convince me."

Julio left, and I felt disappointment. I had thought he was a better person. Other people came to plead with me. Several of them. I told them they should go and cry in church. They were angry with me, but it would pass. Maybe they'd go crazy. None of them asked for a prescription for sleeping pills. It never ceases to amaze me how much suffering people will put up with simply because they're prejudiced against psychiatric drugs. Or maybe they just didn't want to accept anything from me, at least for the moment.

Matías came back every night to carry out his routine. Some of the neighbors shouted more than he did. When I woke up—rarely, because I did take sleeping pills—I chatted online with my ex-husband, who, down South, was also awake. "It's age," he told me. "I don't sleep well anymore."

With the passing days, one of my neighbors—the owner of a car service—broke. He gave a statement to the police saying that Matías Cremonesi had knocked at the door of his business begging for a ride home. But Matías Cremonesi hadn't had any money on him, and my neighbor had refused to take him. A seven-hundred-metre drive, at most. Plus, he added, the boy didn't look trustworthy. He seemed high. What if he was lying, what if he was a thief?

What could he steal? I thought. The man had nothing; no one ever used that car service. The driver spent all his time drinking mate and listening to soccer games. He had at most two customers a week, maybe three. He got by because he owned the building—he would never have been able to pay rent.

My neighbor said that he was very sorry he'd been wrong, poor kid, but people just didn't understand the kind of dangerous conditions we lived with in our neighborhood.

I told my ex-husband that on the night the whole neighborhood had left Matías to his fate out in the street, the night he died, I had been staying at our daughter's house. "But," I wrote to him in our chat, "what if I'd been here? Would I have opened the door? Or would I have acted like all the others?"

"Maybe you wouldn't have opened," he replied. "But you would at least have called the police. They didn't even do that?"

"They didn't even do that," I said.

I didn't tell him that the boy's ghost came every night to remind us of our meanness and our cowardice. It was a secret among the neighbors. My family was so far away! Except for Mom, of course. My ex-husband asked me again to come and live near him and his wife in the South. "She's pregnant," he told me.

"You're crazy," I said. "Sixty is too old to have a baby."

"Why do you think I can't sleep?" he asked.

"I'll think about moving," I lied.

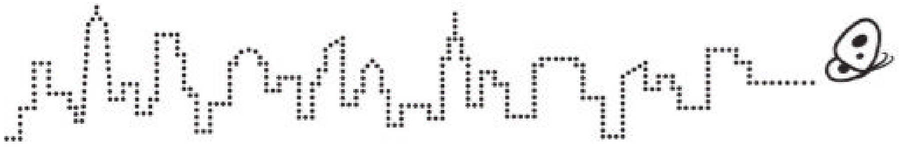
It turns out that my ex-husband's wife has a high-risk pregnancy, and I think he'd like to have me close by to help if there's an emergency or a complication. But I'm no longer on the side of the living. I can't leave my mother alone; she spends more and more nights sitting in the kitchen, just as she did when she was sick and couldn't sleep for the pain. Nor can I leave the rotting girls who laugh hand in hand on the street, though they appear less and less. Where will they go, if someday they leave? The other day, one of them, the one who reminds me of my daughter, took a picture of me with her ghost Samsung. Where is my image? To whom does she show it? Nor do I want to abandon the thief who died alone on the patio under Paulo's gaze; sometimes I see him perched on the roof, expectant as an owl. Is he planning something? And I can't leave the pitiless Matías, though he hates me: his knocking is my lullaby. I don't know if I could sleep without his visits. All of them, my sad dead, are my responsibility. I asked my mother if Matías would let me soothe him someday, and she did something unbelievable: she stuck out her tongue at me. My mother wears a very pretty blue dress printed with anchors, and she looks like a seasoned old sailor. I returned her salute by sticking out my tongue, too, and we laughed together, and I wondered if I was going to grow old with her in this house, until the two of us, mother and daughter, were the same age, going up and down the stairs, sitting in the kitchen, anchors on her dress, coffee stains on my white shirt, and, outside, a future of dead boys and a city that just doesn't know what to do anymore. ♦

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Megan McDowell.)

NEWYORKER.COM

Mariana Enriquez on ghosts and mediums.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

THE MARRYING KIND

The afterlives of Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

There are a few things in our culture that almost no one dislikes. Dolly Parton, fried rice . . . I can think of something else, too. For this item the constituency is smaller—you probably have to go to college to want to vote on it—but really, it, or she, should be included: the Wife of Bath, from Geoffrey Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales." With "The Canterbury Tales," which Chaucer wrote during the last decade or so of his life—he died in 1400, leaving it unfinished—he went a long way toward inventing the novel. Actually, scholars don't agree on what the first novel was, but, more than any other work preceding it, "The Canterbury Tales" has a trait, in abundance, that people look for in a novel and miss if it's not there: the noise and bustle of real human life, the market-square color and variety that you find in "Tom Jones" and "Middlemarch" and "War and Peace"—indeed, in most of the works that we reflexively think of as great novels. One might even say that "The Canterbury Tales" has too much human life, too many characters: some thirty late-medieval people who are going on a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral and who decide to pass the time by taking turns telling stories.

Among them is the Wife of Bath, Alison by name, a clothmaker—well off, well travelled, well dressed, riding a nice horse. Alison is a sort of distillation of the work's chief novelistic qualities, its realism and its immediacy. As she speaks, you can almost feel her breath on your neck. And it's not just medieval life she's talking about. Her story is also a summary of much of the important literature available to people of the Middle Ages, the stories that taught them who they were. Alison is a whole syllabus of human wishes and grudges, blessings and curses—a Divine Comedy, a Metamorphoses, a Decameron, even. (She alludes to all of these sources.)

Her contribution, like that of almost all the pilgrims, is in two parts. First comes a prologue, in which the speaker, who has already been identified by what he or she does for a living, gives us a jumble of opinions and observations about this and that. Then the speaker narrates a tale, which may or may not be related to the prologue. Normally, the tale is the main event, but the Wife of Bath's tale is dwarfed by the unstoppable monologue that precedes it, in which she tells us her views on marriage.

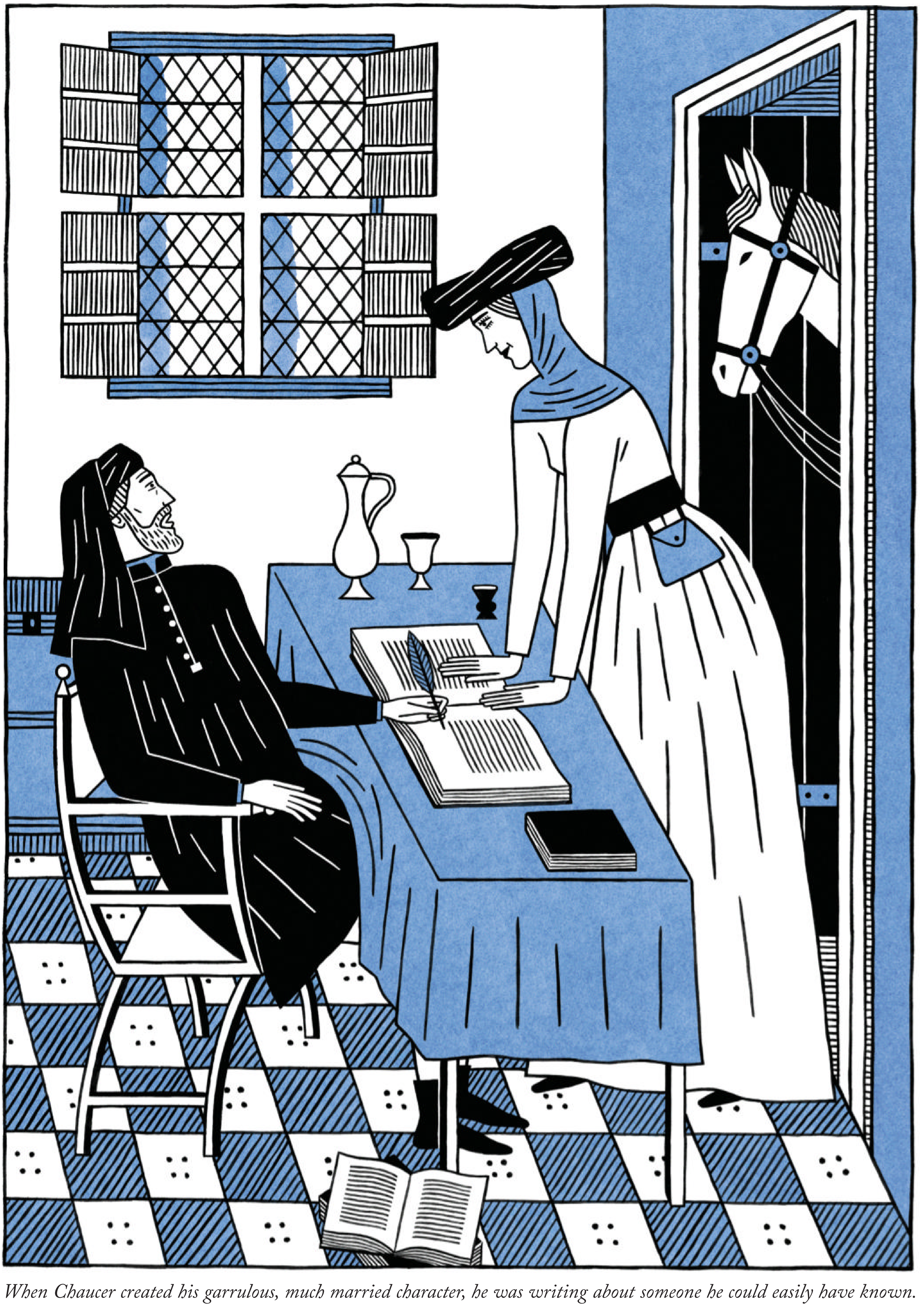
As she says at the outset, she is entitled to speak on this subject, because she's had a lot of experience. Married first at the age of twelve, she has tied the knot five times so far. At the beginning, she liked her husbands old and feeble, so that, in gratitude for her youth and beauty, they would give her whatever she wanted, including their property—all of it, please. To show them what a prize they had won, she often scolded them, especially in bed: "I put them so to work, by my faith, / That many a night they sang, 'Woe is me!'" (I'm quoting from the 1948 translation by Vincent F. Hopper, which helpfully puts the modern English version and Chaucer's Middle English on alternating lines.) But she chided them everywhere else, too. "Sir old dotard," she addresses one poor man. "Old barrel full of lies," she calls another. "Jesus shorten your life!" she yells at a third. When Jesus answers her prayer, leaving her widowed for a fourth time, she does not wear widow's weeds for long. As the coffin is being carried to the church, she can't help lingering over the rear view of her neighbor Jenkin, who is one of the pallbearers:

> I thought he had a pair
> Of legs and feet so clean-cut and beautiful,
> That all my heart I gave to his keeping.
> He was, I believe, about twenty winters old,
> And I was forty, if I speak the truth;
> But yet I always had a colt's tooth. . . .
> So help me God, I was a lively one,
> And fair and rich and young, and well provided for,
> And truthfully, as my husbands told me,
> I had the best pudendum there could be.

Alison has a lot to say, and not all of it stands to reason. She interrupts herself, contradicts herself, then forgets what she was talking about, then—oops!—remembers and returns. Why do people say that a widow shouldn't remarry? she asks. What do they think those things between our legs are for? To expel urine? To help people tell boy babies from girls? Or—an alternative she considers eventually—to enable us to procreate, as the Bible told us to? But why must we procreate? she asks. (She never mentions having any children.) What about using those organs just for our pleasure? she proposes.

Within a month of her fourth husband's burial, Alison is married to

ABOVE: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ



When Chaucer created his garrulous, much married character, he was writing about someone he could easily have known.

ILLUSTRATION BY FANNY BLANC

"If she's from Kansas, why doesn't she have a Midwestern accent?"

• •

Jenkin, the neighbor with the nice legs. This time, though, things are different, because she is now the one who's in love, and therefore, as she sees it, she is operating at a disadvantage. She makes over to Jenkin all of her property, and she listens ruefully as he reads to her from a book he owns that tells stories of women's wickedness: how Eve brought about Adam's fall, how Delilah betrayed Samson to the Philistines, how Clytemnestra murdered Agamemnon upon his return from the Trojan War, how a certain man of ancient Rome, Latumius, told his friend Arrius that in his garden he had a tree on which all three of his wives, one by one, had hanged themselves, out of spite. ("O dear brother," Arrius says, "give me a shoot of that blessed tree, / And it shall be planted in my garden!")

Finally, one night, Alison has had enough. She jumps up from her seat, tears a handful of pages from Jenkin's book, and socks him in the face so hard that he falls backward onto the hearth, where it seems a vigorous fire is burning. He escapes with his life, and, tit for tat, deals Alison a blow on the head that knocks her unconscious, so it seems. But soon she's yelling at him again—for killing her. She asks for one last kiss before dying. All apologies, Jenkin leans down to oblige her, whereupon she socks him in the face once more. "Now will I die," she announces. "I can talk no longer." But, instead, they reach an agreement, and she comes out of it rather well:

> He gave me the bridle entirely in my hand
> To have charge of the house and property . . .
> And I made him burn his book right then at once.

"My own true wife," he says, "Do as you please all the rest of your life." "After that day," Alison recalls, "we never had an argument." So, in the end, she arrives at the same arrangement with Jenkin that she had had with her previous husbands. Well done, Alison!

That is the essence of the Wife of Bath's Prologue: irreverent, triumphant, ribald, fun. At the same time, there are moments of real sadness. Describing Jenkin's regular readings of his misogynist texts, Alison finally turns to her fellow-pilgrims and asks, Who can understand the pain that was in my heart? She loved him, and all he ever told her about women was that they should be disrespected, counted as nothing. They were resentful, horny, pushy, homicidal. As for Alison's fight with Jenkin, Chaucer doesn't let the violence turn into slapstick. Ever since he hit her on the head, Alison says, she has been deaf in the ear on that side. (Chaucer the proto-novelist doesn't forget a detail like that: in the general prologue to the Tales, her slight deafness is the first thing he mentions about her.)

To anyone who knows anything about how literature is being studied in today's universities, it should come as no surprise that the Wife of Bath has been of special interest to Chaucer scholars. She exemplifies the kind of woman—bossy, willful, sexy—that, we are often told, has excited hatred since literature began. In 2019, Marion Turner, a medieval-literature professor at Oxford, became the first woman to write a full-scale biography of the poet: "Chaucer: A European Life." So several centuries had to pass, it seems, before a female scholar felt that she had the right to take on the man whom John Dryden called "the father of English poetry." Now Turner has published a kind of spinoff: "The Wife of Bath: A Biography" (Princeton). Of course, the Wife of Bath is not a person but a fictional creation, so this biography is a history of a fictional character. Turner tells us where the Wife of Bath came from—in terms both of literary precursors and of actual women's lives in Chaucer's England—and then, once the character was hatched, where the idea of such a woman has gone in the course of English literature.

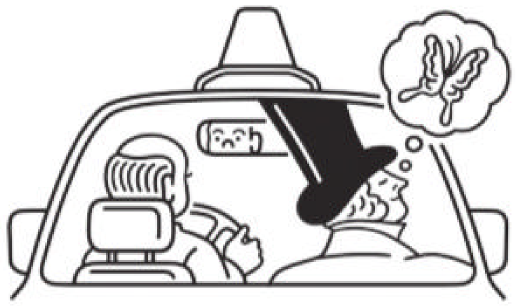
As Jenkin's anthology suggests, there was plenty of flatly misogynist writing circulating in Chaucer's time. For a start, there was Scripture—above all, St. Paul (mentioned by the Wife of Bath), whose reputed declaration that women should not be allowed to speak in church lies behind the Roman Catholic ban on female priests. Or St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into

Latin and who, according to a pair of scholars who have reconstructed the contents of Jenkin's book, was "animated by a nearly neurotic horror of female sexuality." But Chaucer's most important source for the Wife of Bath was not Scripture but a very popular thirteenth-century poem, "The Romance of the Rose," written in Old French. This is a strange composition, the work of two poets of whom not much is known. The first part of it, an allegory of love, is by one Guillaume de Lorris. The poem was then completed by Jean de Meun, who seems to have been a very different character—brash, abrasive, anti-clerical. Jean's half featured a personage called La Vielle (the old woman), who, Turner observes, has much in common with the Wife of Bath: she is a sexually experienced woman who "instructs a young man in the arts of love and lays bare the wiles of women." She also resembles the Wife in having a sense of self: "She looks at her past, she tells us about her experiences, she confesses." But, unlike the Wife of Bath, she is a flatly misogynist creation, a prostitute turned procuress and just the kind of cynical old crone who might appear in Jenkin's book. Although both women arguably see the union between a man and a woman as a negotiation, La Vielle is grimly transactional, lacking the Wife of Bath's wit and warmth, her capacity to keep believing in love.

Marion Turner writes from a feminist perspective, but she is not a presentist—the kind of person who faults the past for failing to live up to the standards, or some people's standards, of the present. Still, any feminist scholar of the Middle Ages has to contend with pervasive (indeed, state- and church-sponsored) misogyny. How, without special pleading, can we account for the fact that the fourteenth century, such a dark time for women, produced a blossom as colorful and funny and full of feeling as the Wife of Bath's Prologue? By assembling evidence that the period wasn't necessarily such a dark time for women, after all.

For one thing, many of these women, Turner says, had money of their own. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, inheritance laws across England evolved, enabling women to claim a greater share of the property of their deceased husbands. Life being short in those days, and girls so often being married off to much older men, such reforms redirected a lot of money to women, including women with most of their lives ahead of them. The Wife of Bath says that she inherited all the property of her first four husbands. This would have made her a very attractive remarriage prospect. Only briefly, befuddled by love for Jenkin, does she make the mistake of losing control of her property, and she soon finds a way to correct her error, going on to survive Jenkin, even though he was twenty years younger than she.

Women were earning their own money, too. In the fourteenth century, the country was depopulated by the Black Death (1347-52), which killed off a third of Europe's inhabitants. Labor was therefore in short supply. Many scholars argue that employers were willing, as a result, to hire women and pay them better wages. In a number of professions, Turner writes, there was no gender pay gap at this time. Women were moving into new kinds of work, too. The jobs most commonly held by Englishwomen in Chaucer's era were domestic service, brewing, spinning cloth, and making clothes. But Turner records female parchment-makers, bookbinders, even blacksmiths. In some cases, she finds only a few examples, as records are sparse. But, of course, there were many more women whose work assisting a husband went unrecorded because it was seen as merely an extension of his labors—unless, like the Wife of Bath, they were widowed and took over the running of the business.



Unquestionably, Chaucer was well acquainted with working women. His wife (who did not always live with him) earned a salary as a lady-in-waiting to a number of aristocratic women, most notably the wife of John of Gaunt, perhaps the most powerful statesman of the time. (Chaucer's granddaughter Alice rose even higher: having married a duke, she ended up administering lands in twenty-two counties and managed to stay alive during the Wars of the Roses by playing both sides.) Chaucer would have been equally aware of the circumstances of working women at a less rarefied level. For much of his life, he squeezed his poetry in around a significant bureaucratic career, including a long stint as a customs officer in London's Wool Quay. The Wife of Bath is a clothmaker—Chaucer tells us that her product outshines even that of industry leaders in Ypres and Ghent. It is touching to think that, in creating her, he was writing about someone he could easily have done business with.

Chaucer, Turner writes, was the first English poet to present a woman in this way: "The Wife of Bath is the first ordinary woman in English literature. By that I mean the first mercantile, working, sexually active woman—not a virginal princess or queen, not a nun, witch, or sorceress, not a damsel in distress nor a functional servant character, not an allegory." Alison is a regular person, who gets up on her horse and reels off eight hundred and twenty-eight lines (her prologue is much longer than any other pilgrim's) of reminiscence, opinion, and merriment. Instruction, too, much of it wise. She is clearly Chaucer's favorite.

Which brings us to another point, one that is hard to make in broad terms but is vital nonetheless. The Wife of Bath, for all her marital misdemeanors, is fundamentally a better person than any other speaker in "The Canterbury Tales." She knows herself and admits her sins—a point that Chaucer makes more forcefully as Alison's testimony goes on. At first, she is fun. Later in the prologue, she is wiser, more thoughtful—and still fun. With her, women, freed of halos or hellfire, entered the world of ethics. About time, Chaucer seems to say.

The remainder of Turner's book has to do with Alison's "afterlife," the books and poems and plays in which her influence can be felt. Turner emphasizes that "The Canterbury Tales" was, for much of its history, viewed as controversial, and that a lot of this could be attributed to the Wife of Bath. Some people thought the prologue was a pretty foul business. Alexander Pope's translation was only half as long as the original, after he took out what he saw as the dirty parts. Dryden, before him, dropped the prologue altogether, for the same reason.

Turner is a painstaking researcher, and for the latter half of the book I think she took too many pains. As she mentions, she did most of the work during the first part of the pandemic lockdown. We therefore learn more than we probably ever needed to know about the afterlife of "The Canterbury Tales." Early readers of Chaucer worried that the Wife of Bath would corrupt female audiences; right-wing columnists in the early nineteen-nineties wondered the same about "Thelma & Louise." But do we need to trawl through an unremarkable assessment of the movie in *U.S. News & World Report* to get the point?

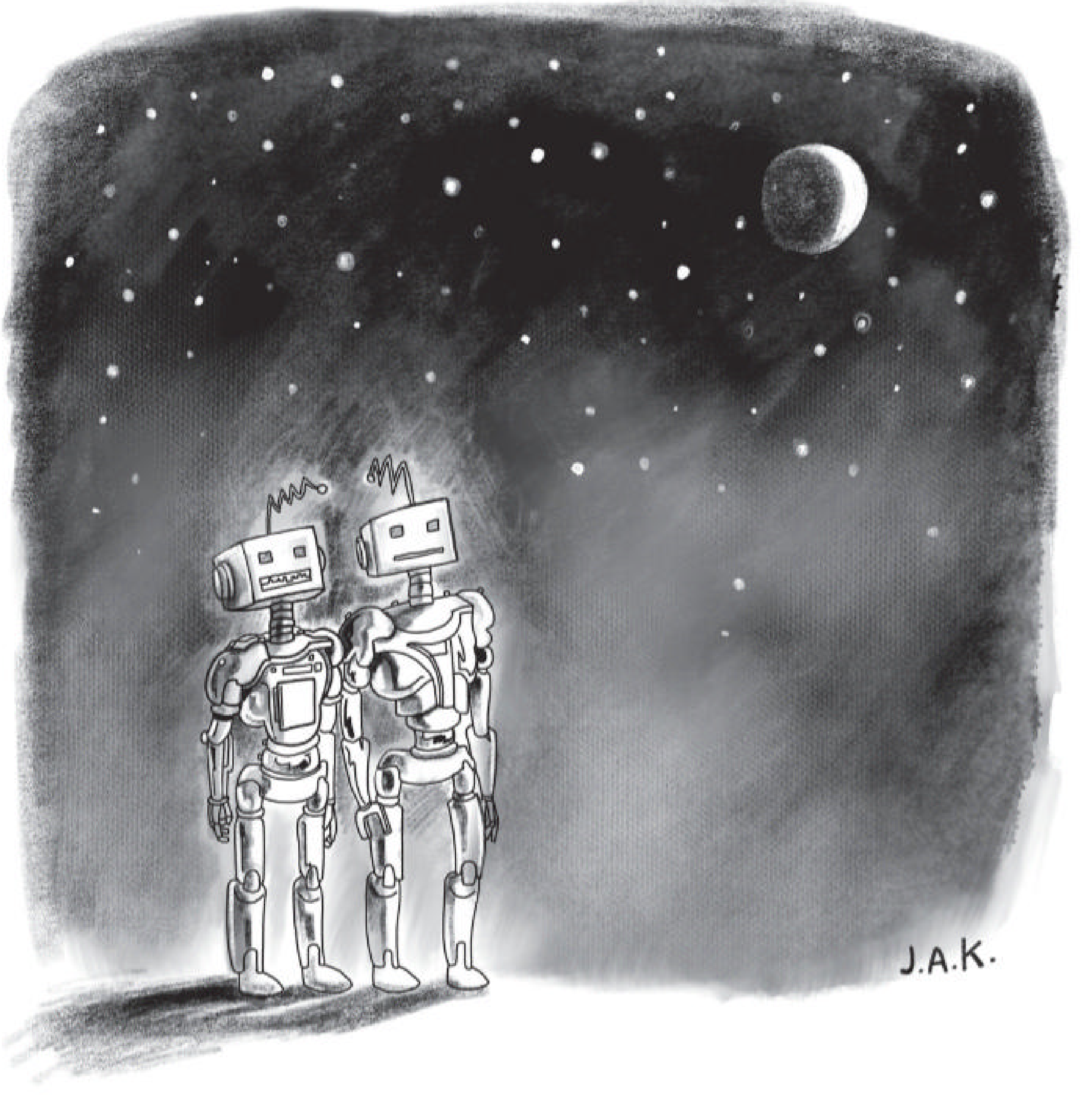
Still, when there is a literary character who can be shown without doubt to be carrying some of the Wife of Bath's genes, you are grateful for Turner's thoroughness. She is especially adept at drawing meaning not only from characters' similarities but also from their differences. Consider Shakespeare's Falstaff, whom Harold Bloom called the Wife of Bath's only child. Turner examines the many ways in which Falstaff echoes the Wife of Bath—her vitality, her appetite, her rebelliousness, her love of talking (and her prowess at it). Falstaff's key divergence from Alison is his shabby ethics. Turner tells us how Shakespeare had to write a new kind of play, "The Merry Wives of Windsor," his only play of middle-class England, she says, "about empowered women . . . and ethical female behaviour."

The same thing is true of Turner's assessment of James Joyce's Molly Bloom—the Wife of Dublin, as it were. Many critics have pointed out the correspondences between their two looping, associative monologues—one a preface, the other an epilogue—each rummaging through the speaker's entire sexual history and gleefully lingering on anything earthy and sensual. Five hundred years after Alison asks the other pilgrims why we were given genitals, Molly is wondering the same thing: "What else were we given all those desires for Id like to know." Turner suggests that Joyce, "a passionate medievalist," might have hewed closer to his source if his overarching Homeric template for "Ulysses" hadn't locked him into making her a Penelope figure. And she spots a telling divergence: if Chaucer's achievement was to create an ordinary woman rather than an allegory, Joyce's cast of mind pushed him in the other direction, taking an ordinary woman and turning her into a figure of near-allegorical universality. Describing Molly's closing speech to a friend, Joyce wrote, "It begins and ends with the female word *yes*. It turns like the huge earth ball slowly surely and evenly round and round spinning."

Turner's gallery of adaptations ends with a trio of dramatic renderings by contemporary Black women based in Britain. American readers are most likely to encounter Zadie Smith's verse drama "The Wife of Willesden," which has recently been published by Penguin and will come to the Brooklyn Academy of Music this spring. (Its world première, in London, was delayed by the pandemic.) As the title indicates, this work, more than Shakespeare's or Joyce's borrowings, is frankly and gratefully adapted from Chaucer. It takes place during a lock-in at a pub near Willesden (the London neighborhood where Smith grew up), which, as an "Author" figure tells us, turns into a kind of open-mike session, with a variety of characters

> All telling their stories. Mostly
> Men. Not because they had better stories
> But because they had no doubt that we should
> Hear them.

Even when women take the mike, they tend just to say "what / They thought others wanted to hear," and the Author worries that the evening's getting dull. Then she notices someone whose life



"Compared with this, we are but toasters."

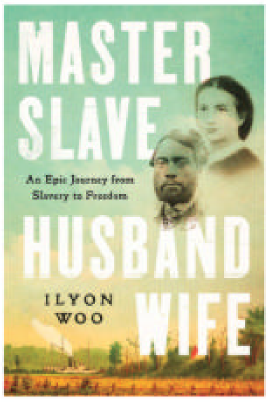
story is "worth hearing": Alvita, a Jamaican-born British woman in her fifties. Alvita needs a bit of persuading to get up onstage, but, once she starts to talk, her witty speech dominates the rest of the play.

Turner speculates that the Wife of Bath, "a marginalised voice that speaks back to power," may hold particular appeal for Black female writers, given that Black women are "doubly oppressed by misogyny and racism." But Smith's work wears its politics lightly and displays a kind of generous humor that feels authentically Chaucerian.

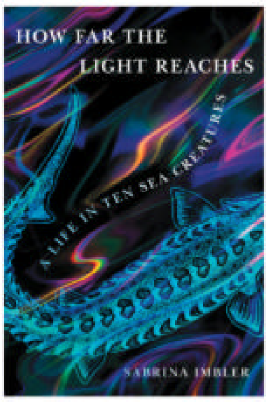
Chaucer has been in the news lately. In 1873, the scholar Frederick J. Furnivall announced that he had found a legal document seeming to suggest that, around 1380, one Cecily Chaumpaigne, the daughter of a prosperous baker, had accused Chaucer of *raptus*, a Latin word (the courts used Latin) that is usually understood to mean rape or abduction. For Furnivall, this was not a happy discovery. He was the founder of the Chaucer Society and of its house organ, *Essays on Chaucer*. Chaucer was his boy. So he made light of the finding, as did scholars who came after him. As late as 1977, the American biographer John Gardner was writing that "into his busy schedule of 1379 or '80 Chaucer managed to fit at least one pretty wench." But, with the advent of academic feminism in the late twentieth century, a number of medievalists forthrightly called Chaucer a rapist. The charge was hard to answer; the court records that could have answered the question sat uncatalogued and largely untouched in the national archives. They wound up stashed in a former salt mine in Cheshire, for safekeeping.

But in October of last year Sebastian Sobecki, a Chaucer scholar at the University of Toronto, and Euan Roger, a medievalist at the British National Archives, published a piece in *The Chaucer Review*, announcing a breakthrough. Using a carefully tailored search, they had pulled up documents that basically exploded the previous discovery. The key document was the original writ, in which a man named Thomas Staundon brought an action against Chaumpaigne *and*

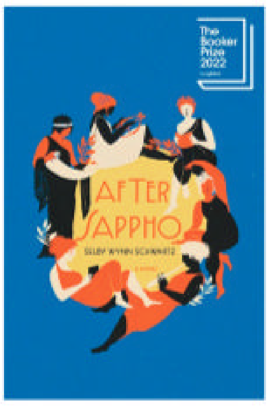
BRIEFLY NOTED



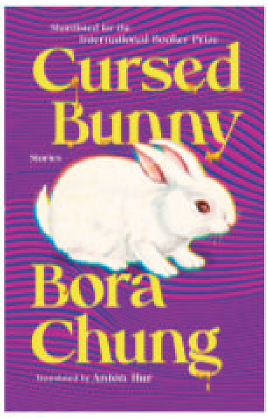
Master Slave Husband Wife, *by Ilyon Woo (Simon & Schuster).* In 1848, Ellen and William Craft escaped slavery in Georgia by disguising themselves—the light-skinned Ellen as a sickly white gentleman, William as his slave—and making their way north by train and steamer. Woo's history draws from a variety of sources, including the Crafts' own account, to reconstruct a "journey of mutual self-emancipation," while artfully sketching the background of a nation careering toward civil war. The Crafts' improbable escape, and their willingness to tell the story afterward on the abolitionist lecture circuit, turned them into a sensation, and Woo argues that they deserve a permanent place in the national consciousness.



How Far the Light Reaches, *by Sabrina Imbler (Little, Brown).* Marine biology, cultural criticism, and memoir blend in this agile collection of essays, which brims with illuminating connections: between a potentially immortal jellyfish that is "always reinventing itself" and Imbler's own sense of metamorphosis as a queer, biracial person; between the sand striker, an "ambush predator," and a man who took advantage of Imbler during adolescence; between Imbler's mother and an octopus species that starves to death while brooding eggs. Like the cuttlefish, which can change appearance "in a fraction of a second," the book has a protean quality, and the way Imbler pays attention to animals living "an alternative way of life" without excessively anthropomorphizing them starts to seem like an ethical act.



After Sappho, *by Selby Wynn Schwartz (Liveright).* "The first thing we did was change our names. We were going to be Sappho," Schwartz writes, in the collective voice of her powerful genre-bending début novel. Composed of fragments, the narrative knits together the lives of feminist and lesbian icons of the twentieth century, including Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, Gertrude Stein, Isadora Duncan, and, most prominently, the Italian writer Lina Poletti, who "was always beckoning us onwards into a future we did not yet know how to live." Schwartz finds moments of levity amid the women's struggles, as when Sibilla Aleramo's 1906 novel, "Una Donna," about an unhappy wife and mother, baffles male editors with its popularity. "Perhaps there was a new market in boring stories about women, they remarked."



Cursed Bunny, *by Bora Chung, translated from the Korean by Anton Hur (Algonquin).* The ten disquieting, bloody tales in this collection conjure a pitiless, almost folkloric world. A bunny-shaped lamp acts as a "cursed fetish" that extinguishes generations of a family and their misbegotten liquor empire; a woman who cannot find a father for her suddenly growing fetus is condemned to birth a "slightly iron-smelling, enormous blood clot." In Chung's universe of inventive horrors, brutality is endemic, and yet lyricism finds its place—in, for instance, a woman who is "transformed into thousands of water droplets and scattered into thin air," or in the eye of a slain monster which is "shockingly deep and clear, and cruel."

THE NEW YORKER
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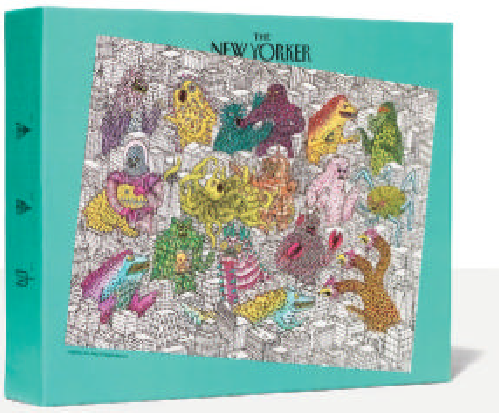

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The Spot-Art Sticker Sheet

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Chaucer—as *co*-defendants. It turned out that Chaumpaigne had been a servant of Staundon's. In fact, it all came back to the Black Death and the seller's market in labor that it created. If you weren't in the third of the workforce who died a horrible death as the plague moved through your neighborhood, you were suddenly in a nice bargaining position. To the people who ran fourteenth-century England, this was clearly a bad thing. They passed laws that forbade servants to become free agents, selling their work to the highest bidder. Hiring a servant away before the completion of his or her agreed-upon period of service became a crime. And that, it seems, is what Chaucer was accused of: not of raping Cecily Chaumpaigne but of hiring her before the end of her period of employment with Staundon.

This discovery, which made the front page of the New York *Times*, was, of course, a perfect battlefield for a certain corner of the culture wars. In London, the *Daily Telegraph* blared, "CHAUCER WRONGLY ACCUSED OF RAPE FOR 150 YEARS," while feminists from the medievalist department tut-tutted that the new evidence, however much it might shift the burden of proof, did not absolve Chaucer of being part of the "rape culture" of the late Middle Ages. Sobecki and Roger took great pains to head this off at the pass, inviting responses from feminist scholars and conceding that Chaucer still "participated in hegemonic discourses that shaped the lives of all women." But they had a hard job.

Oddly, few of these articles mentioned the Wife of Bath's tale (as opposed to her prologue), which is about a rape and the punishment for it. A knight at the court of King Arthur, returning from hawking one day, sees a young woman and deflowers her "by sheer force." There is an outcry for justice to be done, and the man is sentenced to death. But the Queen asks that the man be handed over to her, instead, and offers him his life if he can find out, within a year and a day, "what thing it is that women most desire." In a year of research, the knight finds many possible answers but no consensus. As he heads despairingly back to the court, he encounters an old crone, described as the ugliest woman imaginable, who says that she'll tell him the answer he needs if he grants her what she asks for afterward. The answer is that "women desire to have sovereignty / Over their husbands as much as over their lovers / And to be the masters of them." The price of this amnesty is that the knight must now marry the old woman. After much protest, he does, and on their wedding night she is transformed into a beautiful young woman.

What are we meant to think about all this? We might be pleased to note that Chaucer sees rape as a serious crime, one that can carry a death sentence. Or we might be disappointed to notice that the rest of the tale concerns itself with the salvation of the perpetrator rather than with the fate of the victim. The knight is repeatedly humiliated by powerful women, but, by the end of the story, he has effectively been rewarded for his crime. These questions become knottier still once we start to wonder about the Wife of Bath's own attitudes. The answer to the Queen's question is certainly in line with what Alison says in her prologue, but what are we to make of her juxtaposition of a prologue that's all about marriage with a tale that's all about rape?

The Wife of Bath doesn't say. She has told us earlier that she is on the lookout for husband No. 6, and what sort she would prefer:

> May Jesus Christ send us
> Husbands meek, young, and fresh in bed,
> And grace to outlive those we wed.
> And also I pray Jesus to cut short their lives
> Who will not be ruled by their wives.

But she has no regrets about her marital career so far:

> Lord Christ! when I think back
> Upon my youth, and on my gaiety,
> It tickles me to the bottom of my heart. . . .
> That I have had my day in my time.
> But age, alas! that poisons everything,
> Has robbed me of my beauty and my vigor;
> Let it go, farewell, the devil go with it!
> The flour is gone, there is no more to say,
> The chaff, as best I can, I must sell now;
> But still I will attempt to be right merry.

And off she goes, clomping down the road to Canterbury, on her fine horse. ♦

BOOKS

DESPERATELY NORMAL

Daughters outgrow their parents in Gwendoline Riley's unsparing novels.

BY JAMES WOOD

Riley's merciless prose lays bare the dynamics of damage and survival.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DARAGH SODEN

In the essay "Dreams of Her Real Self," the Australian writer Helen Garner performs the difficult task of honestly appraising her mother. Difficult because love and honesty may be at odds; it is discomfiting to outgrow your parents, to feel more intelligent or more sophisticated than they are, as if you were somehow robbing them of a gift that they already gave you. And careful observation can be so close to mockery: "She used to wear hats that pained me," Garner writes. "Shy little round beige felt hats with narrow brims. . . . And she stood with her feet close together, in sensible shoes." Garner admits that she finds it hard to get her mother into focus, in part because her overbearing father did such a good job of blocking the view, "as he blocked her horizon," and in part because her mother's hesitant self-effacement rendered her both genuinely obscure and obscurely irritating: "She seemed astonished that someone should be interested in her." To be her intellectual superior, Garner writes, "was unbearable." Yet she also admits to the guilty pleasure of refusing her mother the easy concessions that she knows will make her happy. An intimate portrait expands naturally into a social and political sketch: daughter and mother represent not only different generations but different examples of female ambition and opportunity.

I thought often of Garner's essay while reading two short, savage novels by the English writer Gwendoline Riley, "First Love" and "My Phantoms," both published by New York Review Books. I may have encountered more ambitious first and second novels, but I don't recall reading any as grotesquely honest about the original sin of being born to inadequate parents. Riley has Garner's quick eye for detail but replaces her anguished charity with vengeful clarity. Both of her novels have the unguarded nudity of correspondence; they have no time for the diplomatic niceties, the aesthetic throat-clearing of most literary fiction. The two novels relate to each other like twitching limbs from the same violated torso. Each one is narrated by a young, bookish woman—Neve in "First Love," Bridget in "My Phantoms"—who lives in London with a male partner. In each book, this young woman, reared in lower-middle-class Liverpool, is struggling to achieve independence from her ghastly and abusive parents, who separated when she was small. In each book, the narrator's father is a cruel boor and her mother a damaged fool, wreathed in the spoils of her defeat. In each book, the awful father is dispatched within the first forty or so pages, with the novel spending the balance of its negative ledger on the awful mother. In Riley's economy, fathers are brutish but die off ("First Love") or, in their martial primitivism, can be swerved around, like sluggish tanks ("My Phantoms"). Mothers, alas, stick around longer and want more, cleaving to their adult children with a sickly persistence. Mothers are the life problems with which Neve and Bridget must do serious battle.

Ford Madox Ford once said that his friend Joseph Conrad was never really satisfied that he had properly established his characters on the page—what Ford calls "getting a character in." Ford speculated that perhaps this lack of literary confidence accounted for the great length of some of Conrad's novels, as if the uncertain novelist were condemned to try and try again. In this respect, Riley is Conrad's opposite: her novels are so short because they are so

confidently exact. She knows just how to get her characters through the doorway and into a scene—all that they have to do, in order to sign their own moral death warrants, is start talking. In "My Phantoms," Bridget's father, Lee, likes to lecture his teen-age daughter about her reading. He's the kind of joker who snatches her book from her hands, and then bullyingly opines on it—this writer is a "creep," that one was recently on TV and is a pretentious "poser," and so on. When he sees her reading Chekhov's plays, he's scornful: " 'You do know there's no *point* reading things in a translation,' he said. 'Because it's not the original language,' he explained. 'It could be anything.' " He seems to route all literary knowledge through a single novel, which he heard on the radio as a boy, and is dismissive of any competition: "Get back to me when you've read *Of Mice and Men!*" Something about that formulation, "get back to me," with its hollow male swagger, its reek of David Brent's Slough office, instantly gets this character *in*.

In the same novel, Bridget's mother, Helen, brings a new boyfriend to a café to meet Bridget. The boyfriend is called Joe Quinn, and he exists in the novel for only a few pages. It's all that's needed. At first, Joe silently drinks his Guinness while looking at the back wall of the café. As long as he keeps his mouth shut, he might be passable, but then he opens it. This is the extent of his engagement with Bridget:

> "So we're all supposed to call you 'Doctor' are we?" Joe said, to me.
>
> "No," I said. "Why do you say that?"
>
> "Your mother said you're doing a PhD," he said.
>
> "Oh yes. I don't have it yet, alas! There's a year or so to go. But even when I do . . ."
>
> "Your mother said, we have to call her Doctor."
>
> "Oh, right. No. I've never said that, Mum!"
>
> "Or else," he said.
>
> "No," I said.
>
> "I knew it!" said Joe. "I thought, fuck off! Seriously? Doctor?"

Joe is in. And swiftly out.

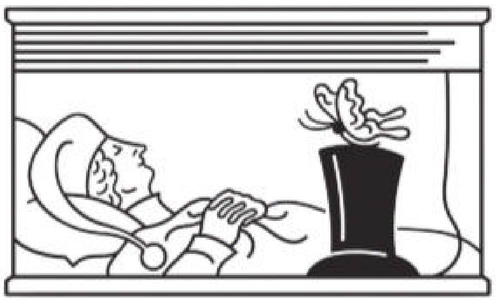
In Riley's world, the women who consort with such men have been emptied of their confidence and are merely mimicking the men's aggressive insistence with their own passive-aggressive survivalism. They're easily flustered, and they tend to overperform their anxiety in a futile effort to draw its sting. In "First Love," Neve's mother looks "frightened" when a waitress puts an unfamiliar teapot in front of her—it's transparent, with a plunger—and whispers to her daughter, "How do we get the tea out?" In "My Phantoms," Helen comes to London once a year, to celebrate her birthday with Bridget. Entering the designated restaurant, Bridget sees her mother sitting expectantly: "My mother was always there when I arrived: smiling at the room; determined to get the most out of her evening." A few pages later, Helen tells Bridget about her new haircut, a recent extravagance involving a celebrity stylist. A disaster, of course, and not just because the stylist spent the whole time telling Helen about his previous client, a TV presenter: "I had to listen to him going on and on about this other woman's wonderful hair. . . . I mean. Hello? And they'd brought me the world's smallest glass of Prosecco, which was included, you know—sounds nice, but every time I leant forward to sip from it he sort of huffed like I was holding him up or something. . . . I mean it was wham bam thank you ma'am and don't darken our doors again sort of thing."

What unites the fathers and the mothers in these novels is their deep disappointment with the world. This disappointment serves as both hunger and food, arresting these damaged people at their endless banquets of hostility and revulsion. The men turn that hostility outward: "He could never hear enough about the inadequacy of people who weren't him" is how Bridget devastatingly summarizes her father's style. The women turn it inward. Both genders are fabulously self-involved, the women happier to riff—only because, one suspects, they are more talkative than the men—at tedious length, without any assistance from interlocutors. But one shouldn't mistake their wounded narcissism for true self-love. Riley shows us how little they like themselves, how they cover their profound lack of confidence with volumes of nervous bluster. Lee tells Bridget to remember, apropos of Chekhov, that "Russia is *huge*." And then he repeats himself, "It's a really big place," which, we're told, he enunciates "seriously, almost angrily." Bridget's mother likes to say that she "hates" things. For instance, she goes to jazz concerts with a gay man named Griff, even though she "hates" jazz. Bridget knows better: "Hate hate hate. But my mother didn't hate. It was just a word she used. It was just her announcing-ness. She thought it sounded vital and dashing. She thought it set her apart."

Riley is a brilliant summoner of her characters' "announcing-ness." And how good she is at her own version, at swiftly announcing a mood, a moment, a tableau. With a few words, she can paint a dreary English January ("Each day brought just a few hours of dampened light"), a cramped Glasgow flat ("You had to squeeze into the shower, elbows tucked: a saint in its niche"), or some breathtaking desolation: "I didn't, as a rule, talk to her about anything that mattered to me," Bridget says of her mother. "Why upset her by talking about things she couldn't understand or enjoy?" Likewise, Riley's details are spare and killing. In "First Love," Neve's mother bravely moves from Liverpool to Manchester, determined to branch out as a single woman. She may still own the "purple-framed glasses" and "too-big thermal gloves" of her former life, along with her William Morris tote bags, but now she's living on her own, in her "bachelorette pad." And she is daringly growing her hair. Too daringly, perhaps. For her daughter sees all: "It lay in chancy locks around her neck, held back from her face that day by a padded Alice band." That terrible appraising adjective, "chancy"—it doesn't award too many chances to Neve's poor mum.

Novels that so emphatically lack charity threaten to enroll the guilty reader in nothing more than the author's hellish vengeance. They can seem hard to justify. One has the sense, reading Riley, of being involved in an alarming experiment, that of reading the world without the slightest mercy or compromise. But at least, in this state of nature, the dynamics of survival and damage are usefully laid bare. In "First Love," Neve has fled the ruins of her violent upbringing in Liverpool for London, only to marry an older man, Edwyn, who seems as misogynistically abusive as her own late father. So she has effectively married her father, and is suspended between managing this new version of the tyrant she once called a "little imperator" and the attentions of her needy, sad, drifting mother. In other words, Neve has not escaped at all—she is her parents' child rather than an independent adult, still firmly enchained in family. And how: Edwyn, a talented abuser, blames her for confusing him with her father while he behaves like her father and then blames her for being the kind of woman who gets abused by people like her father, which is to say, people like him. "You hated him, he was cruel to you, that's the only relationship you understand," he says.

Another result of Riley's experiment in unillusioned dissection is that we truly see her characters, in their descriptive nakedness, alive and horridly vivid. The mothers of Neve and Bridget loom out of these books, essentially one composite figure, recognizable both as frail human beings and as solid English types. Easily intimidated by perceived sophistication, the Riley mother views the world suspiciously, since it seems eager to trip her up. Her social life, to use Riley's word, is extremely "determined." Divorced, intermittently single, she prosecutes a busy existence of talks, concerts, readings—the Victorian Society, the Wine Circle, the Clan Grant Society. She makes friends with men who are reliably less interested in her than she in them. "Are you a fan of garlic, Helen?" John, Bridget's partner, asks when Helen comes to their London flat for lunch. He's doing the cooking. Helen nervously replies, "Well . . . what do you mean by fan?" The exchange places us instantly in a certain kind of comic English universe, a middle England of petit-bourgeois prejudices and anxieties, of lovingly coddled provincialisms and mortal narrowness. For every English eccentric, there are two fellow-citizens desperate to appear anything but, desperate to be crushingly "normal." (We know this abnormally normal world from, say, Mike Leigh's play "Abigail's Party"; Jeanette Winterson's first novel, "Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit"; David Mitchell's "Black Swan Green.")



One thing that heartlessly unsentimental writing does is force the reader to generate the very sympathy such books lack. Stirred in this way, I found myself oddly drawn to Bridget's mother in particular, perhaps because my own mother had a William Morris tote bag or two, belonged to a Scottish-clan society, and kept up many cultural "interests." Like Helen, she also possessed a full complement of petit-bourgeois anxieties, tics, and unreadable rules (such as putting the milk into the teacup before the tea). In fact, "My Phantoms" is not without its glimmers of charity and compassion, and it's a better novel than "First Love" for them. Once the cruel father is dispensed with, Riley brings Bridget's mother to the front and center of the story. We witness Helen's friendship with Griff, hear about her unfathomable two-year marriage to the boorish Joe Quinn, follow her as she—like the mother in "First Love"—moves to Manchester, watch her as she valiantly tries and fails to comprehend Elena Ferrante's novels. ("But how can you read it if you haven't got the two lead characters straight?" Bridget asks her mother in exasperation.)

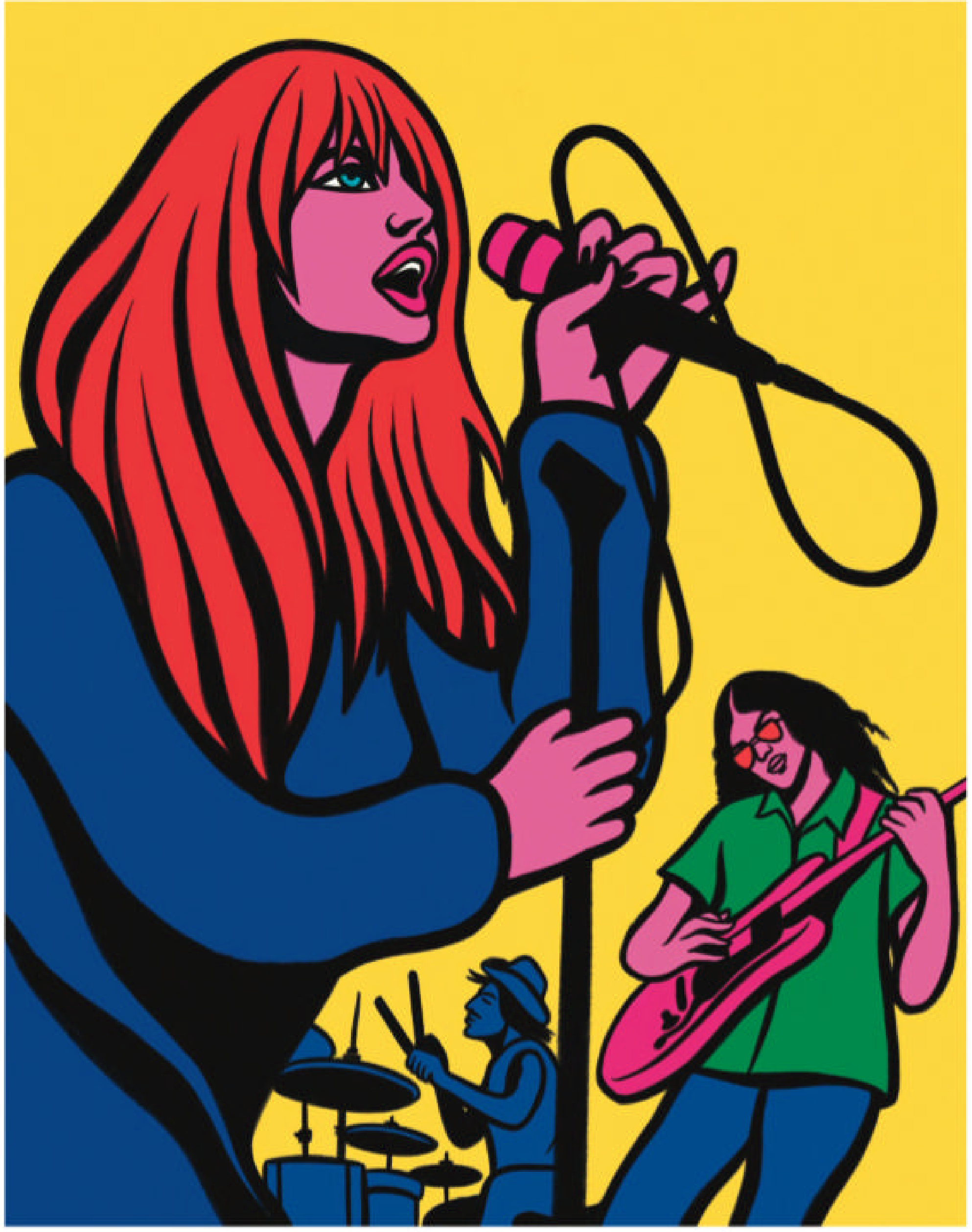
"My Phantoms," indeed, follows Helen all the way to the end of her life, when she is hospitalized, in her late sixties, with a brain tumor. In crisis, Bridget proves herself an unexpectedly faithful if still easily irritated daughter, visiting her dying mother as often as she can, even as Helen retreats into wordless hostility. The novel thus offers an enriching sense of a whole life surveyed, even if its arc is finally poignant—for Helen's life lacked any great fulfillment, was of little consequence, and was remarkable principally for the short-circuiting of its ambitions and projects. What did Helen spend that life searching for? Bridget puts it precisely, almost tenderly: "A place she could feel was her rightful place, from where she could look out at other people less fearfully." ♦

POP MUSIC

NOSTALGIA CYCLES

Why contemporary artists love the teen-age angst of early Paramore.

BY CARRIE BATTAN



The tides of influence in music history move in unexpected ways. There are very few towering rock legends or chart-dominating contemporary rappers, for instance, who've enjoyed the sprawling and intensifying authority of the pop-punk band Paramore. The band, which was formed in the mid-two-thousands by a group of Christian teen-agers from the outskirts of Nashville, rose to prominence as emo and pop punk were being commercialized for mainstream audiences. Paramore—fronted by Hayley Williams, a vocal powerhouse with neon-marigold hair and a high degree of emotional athleticism—was a small-town Myspace act that hit it big. By the band's third album, "Brand New Eyes," from 2009, it had been nominated for a Grammy and included on the "Twilight" soundtrack. The following year, departing bandmates condemned it for being a "manufactured product of a major label." No band had ever put the "pop" in "pop punk" more effectively than Paramore.

These days, the members of Paramore are in their early thirties, and are more interested in the eclectic sounds of art rock. But the emotional and stylistic influence of their earlier era still has a hold on a new generation of stars. A current wave of young, brooding rappers who incorporate emo and punk into their sounds frequently express reverence for Paramore. The theatrically excitable rap star Lil Uzi Vert asked Williams to feature on one of his songs. (She declined, telling him, "I don't want to be that famous.") In 2021, the Brooklyn rapper Bizzy Banks combined a Paramore hit from 2013 called "Still Into You" with a quintessentially brutal drill beat. In between rap verses detailing violent rivalries, he sang Williams's hook, "I'm iiiiiiinnnnntttooo you." There are now YouTube explainers and think pieces dedicated to the topic of Paramore's Black fandom. "Liking Paramore is one of the Blackest things you can do right now," a vlogger named Madisyn Brown recently said.

Pop punk, like disco, was maligned in its infancy but is now remembered fondly.

Williams also looms large among this decade's young, female indie-rock and anti-pop stars, including Billie Eilish, Soccer Mommy, and Olivia Rodrigo. There is so much of Paramore's DNA in Rodrigo's plucky pop-rock sound that, in 2021, she had to add a songwriting credit for the band to her single "Good 4 U," because it was similar to an early Paramore song called "Misery Business." When Paramore was starting out, Williams was virtually the only prominent woman in the commercial pop-punk scene, but today—in an alt-pop scene largely led by young women—her status has made her an object of idol worship.

Pop punk, much like disco, was maligned during its infancy but is now a subject of affectionate nostalgia. Many of its most commercially successful stars from the two-thousands are currently in a never-ending state of reboot or reunion. When the genre's cornerstone live event, Warped Tour, shuttered, in 2019, other big-budget platforms swooped in to take its place, including Live Nation's annual When We Were Young Festival. This event leans enthusiastically into nostalgia: last year's festival, which was sold out, booked bands like My Chemical Romance, Jimmy Eat World, and Paramore, and charged two hundred and fifty dollars a head. The festival's first day was cancelled owing to weather, leaving fans with a sense of petty cosmic injustice that would probably make good fodder for an anguished emo-pop song.

With the nostalgic impulses around them growing stronger, the members of Paramore have found themselves caught between their past and their future. Many

ILLUSTRATION BY TRACY CHAHWAN

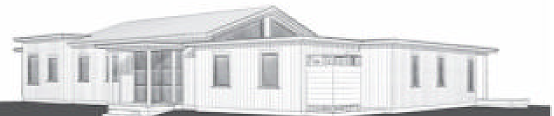
of their fans cling to the band’s formative era, but the group also seems eager to prove that it has evolved beyond angsty juvenilia. In 2013, Paramore released a self-titled record that was expansive and polished, with plenty of arena-ready hooks and ambitious stylistic experiments. It débuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* album chart. One of its singles, “Ain’t It Fun,” won a Grammy, and rightfully so. It’s a cheerful pop-rock song that incorporates elements of soul and R. & B. In one of its later choruses, Williams is joined by a gospel choir.

Since then, the band has continued to make dramatic strides away from its origins. Not all have been as convincing as “Ain’t It Fun.” On “After Laughter,” from 2017, the band experimented with nostalgia for a different era, trying its hand at eighties synth pop and art rock. Williams, who was twenty-eight at the time, abandoned her signature vocal style, giving smoother performances that verged on cutesy. It was ostensibly a step outside the band’s comfort zone, but there was something cloistered about its vague indie-pop ambitions.

Part of the reason that Paramore’s early music has aged so well has been the directness of Williams’s lyrics. They often center on timeworn experiences of heartbreak and youthful frustration, and are suffused with the melodrama and fatalism that only a teen-ager from a small-town emo scene could muster. “I fear I might break, / and I fear I can’t take it / Tonight I’ll lie awake feeling empty,” she sings on “Pressure,” a fan favorite from the band’s 2005 début album, “All We Know Is Falling.” Williams released two intensely personal solo projects during the pandemic, but on Paramore’s new record, “This Is Why,” which comes out this month, romantic torment has been replaced by the more topical concerns of her generation. “I’m far, / so far / from a frontline / Quite the opposite, I’m safe inside,” Williams shouts, on a song called “The News.” “But I worry, and I give money, and I feel useless behind this computer and that’s just barely / scratched the surface of my mind.”

Stylistically, Paramore is now grazing on sounds from the eighties. Instrumental flourishes, funky arrangements, and theatrical vocal lines recall the art-house innovations of the Talking Heads or the absurdist approach of the B-52s. Yet the record is firmly rooted in the topical concerns of the present, and Williams often meditates on worries that might sound dated in a few years. Her songs vibrate with the anxieties of late-pandemic, tech-addled millennials sliding toward middle age and antisocial tendencies. “There was traffic, / spilled my coffee, / crashed my car,” Williams sings on “Running Out of Time,” a winking critique of millennial excuse-making. “Otherwise, woulda been here on time.” These explorations of modern life—which are accurate, heartfelt, and depressing in their blandness—illuminate why nostalgia has become a default creative path. The record’s most arresting moment is “Thick Skull,” the album’s final track but the song that the band wrote first. Stripped of philosophizing and fussy production, it’s Williams’s most unvarnished vocal performance in nearly a decade.

Reconciling history with the present is always a challenge. But the dissonance that Paramore experiences is especially potent, given that the most trend-minded new musicians are celebrating music they made years ago. One of Paramore’s most beloved songs is “Misery Business,” from its 2007 album, “Riot!” It’s a screed about romantic competition with another woman. Williams sounds as if she were possessed by the lyrics, not merely singing them. “Second chances they don’t ever matter, people never change / Once a whore, you’re nothing more,” one lyric goes. In 2018, deep into the #MeToo news cycle, use of the word “whore” seemed uncouth to Williams and a number of her fans, and the band retired the song from its live act. Last year, though, “Misery Business” was resuscitated. Rodrigo, for one, referenced it on “Good 4 U.” Eilish invited Williams onstage during her Coachella performance, last year, to duet the track. When Paramore performed “Misery Business” again at a show last fall, Williams took a moment to vamp during the song’s breakdown, exasperated by the flip-flopping that had jerked it in and out of fashion. “I’m not going to preach about it,” she told the crowd. “I’m just going to say, Thank you for being nostalgic about this, because this is one of the coolest moments of our show.” ♦



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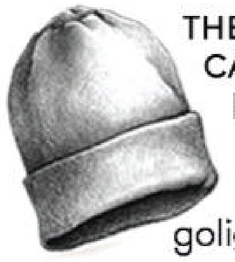

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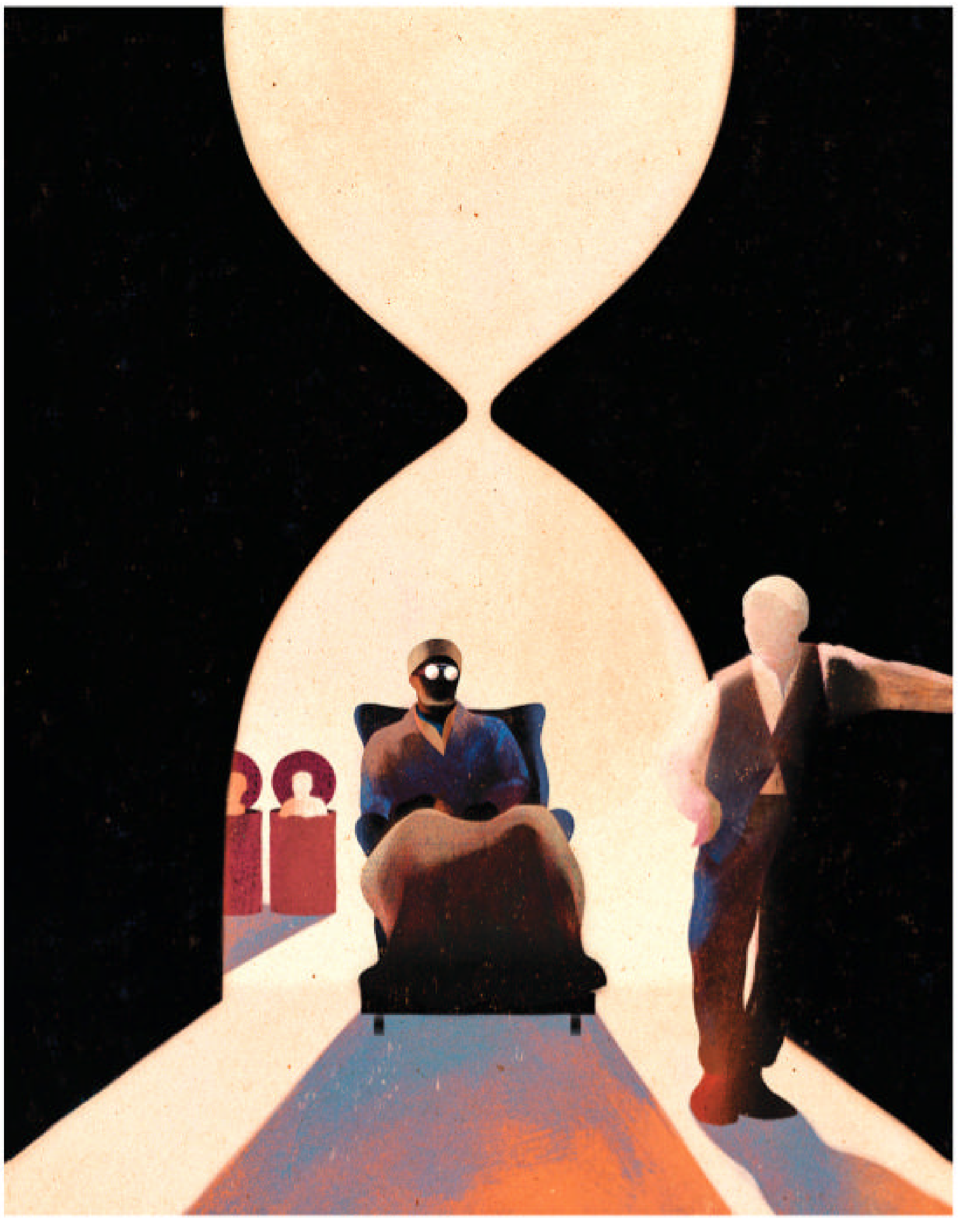
THE THEATRE

TIME FRAME

A new production of Samuel Beckett's "Endgame."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



John Douglas Thompson and Bill Irwin make for an existential vaudeville duo.

Samuel Beckett's play "Endgame," now up at the Irish Repertory Theatre, under the direction of Ciarán O'Reilly, begins with a wordless spectacle. A man moves around the stage, drawing curtains back to reveal not the windows that the audience expects but one brick wall after another. There are two excruciatingly small openings in the brick, like portholes on a ship, which take a while—and a ladder—to pry open. It's the kind of sight gag that can express the whole symbolic structure of a show: "Endgame" is a series of thwartings—thwarted connections, thwarted meanings, clipped-off attempts to tell a story. Every time you think a vista of clarity might be on the horizon, you slam into a new wall that obfuscates the view.

The curtain drawer's name is Clov (Bill Irwin), and, like many of the characters strewn dismally through Beckett's œuvre, he has a physical disability. His legs are bowed and unsteady, and he's in obvious, constant pain. In order to open the small windows, he has to drag a ladder onstage. He's expert at managing obstacles: he throws his legs over the top of the ladder with a workman's precision. Irwin executes Clov's motions with an almost surreal rhythm, full of pauses and habitual tics, squeezing something like style out of a daily challenge. Clov has obviously been here—wherever this dim, cluttered, gloomy, perhaps post-apocalyptic room is—for a long time. His repetitions have made him highly skilled, in his way, at his low tasks.

Clov works for Hamm (John Douglas Thompson), an imperious blind man who sits in a chair bolted to a wheeled platform—a kind of makeshift wheelchair. Hamm bosses Clov around incessantly, issuing contradictory orders at maximum volume, keeping him in perpetual transit, a purgatory of fetching and delivering, between an offstage kitchen and the chair, which Hamm insists be placed "bang in the center" of the room—that is, until, a breath later, he chides, "A little too far to the left." He asks for a stuffed dog he calls a pet, then commands Clov to mount the ladder once more and report what he can see outside.

One window, we learn, faces land, and the other faces the sea. They could be on an island, or near a coast, or—this fits the play's mood best—at the ragged, wild edge of an abandoned continent, which is slowly succumbing to nature's reclamation. When Clov sees someone through one of the windows, Hamm can barely believe it. They had a neighbor once—Clov makes sure to remind Hamm that he declined to lend her some oil for her lamp. "You know what she died of, Mother Pegg?" Clov asks reproachfully. "Of darkness." Sometimes Hamm just wants to be pushed around the perimeter of the room.

We never learn why Clov and Hamm are here, or precisely why Clov continues, day after day, to obey a tyrant who can't walk or see. Still less explicable is the fact that Hamm's legless parents, Nagg (Joe Grifasi) and Nell (Patrice Johnson Chevannes), are in metal trash cans onstage. Hamm regards them contemptuously: he calls his father his "progenitor" at one point, and a "fornicator" later on. The one locus of potential sweetness resides in the relationship between the two old-timers. They try to kiss, but that's thwarted, too: the space between their cans is a skosh too wide. They reminisce about a long-ago trip to Lake Como and tell each other stupid jokes they've already told, or heard, far too many times. Nell sighs at the thought of "yesterday," which has almost as much allure for her as the old jaunt to Italy. The idea of a yesterday is a salve for the ceaseless present, a reminder that time does move, even if its motion—or, implicitly, life itself—means nothing, changes nothing, heals no wounds.

ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN GENT

Hamm sometimes tries to appeal to Clov's sensitivities; he asks Clov to kiss him on the forehead, or to hold hands. But these entreaties feel like moves in a sick game whose ends are clear only to Hamm. He keeps asking if it's time for him to take a painkiller. He keeps wondering when "it"—his ordeal in this awful room, or the play we're all watching, or his life—will "end."

"Endgame" was first staged in 1957, four years after "Waiting for Godot" premièred. But Beckett wrote "Endgame" first, and later on he cited the lesser-known work as his favorite of his plays. This new production, dismaying in its simplicity but surprising in how many laughs it finds amid the gray, makes it easy to agree with Beckett. "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," Nell says. O'Reilly and his company make that true here. But the rest of Nell's dictum is true, too: "And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh anymore."

Thompson and Irwin play off each other like an existential vaudeville duo, wringing moments of superb physical comedy from two characters who struggle to move. Clov says he "can't sit," all Hamm can do is sit, the parents are planted in their cans—the chaos the foursome creates in these small quarters is the product of a collaborative perversity. Their ethos regarding home décor is the flat opposite of Marie Kondo's: they keep—and throw, and lug—around only what obliterates the most joy. The dog is a drag; it won't stand up. (The effective set was designed by Charlie Corcoran, with sensitive lighting by Michael Gottlieb.)

The dialogue is full of Beckettian repetitions and hesitations. Loose thoughts sprout up like poppies, hopeful signs of true, colorful expression, then wither away too soon. The characters' strong urge to communicate is equalled only by their certainty that they'll ultimately fail. But language is still a lure for them. "I'll leave you," Clov says, making a threatening motion toward the door.

> HAMM: No!
> CLOV: What is there to keep me here?
> HAMM: The dialogue.
> (Pause.)
> I've got on with my story.

The play has many meta-theatrical moments like this. "This is what we call making an exit," Clov says at one point. At another moment, Hamm quips, "Did you never hear an aside before? I'm warming up for my last soliloquy."

Appropriately, then, the performance styles of the leads—the different modes of theatre they represent—help open up new meanings in Beckett's text. Irwin might be the most celebrated clown in America; he graduated from Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey's Clown College and, since then, has created and starred in countless clowning-influenced productions. Here, his sublimely detailed and stylized physical performance—slow, stubborn, exasperated, agonizing—makes Clov into a bitter fool. Like the figures who populate commedia dell'arte, he's a stock character: the put-upon servant whose job, despite his smoldering anger, is to wear a professional mask. He can't stifle his hatred of Hamm, or of the life they share, but to leave, it seems, would be a kind of death. To "exit" the rings of this highly charged circus is to cease to exist. Each excursion offstage is a dalliance with the void.

Thompson, on the other hand, is best known as a formidable Shakespearean actor—most recently as a thrilling Shylock in a production of "The Merchant of Venice" by Shakespeare Theatre Company and Theatre for a New Audience. The traces of that training are palpable here. Since Hamm can't leave his chair, Thompson's entire performance, by turns absurd and deeply moving, happens in his voice and face and hands. He bellows and wheedles and begs and makes ardent flourishes with his arms, savoring iambs as he roves through Beckett's sentences.

Thompson's presence makes clear the correspondence between Beckett and the Bard. The more I listened to him, the more I thought of "Endgame" as taking place within a Shakespearean speech—one that had been wrenched out of context and sucked dry of narrative potential, doomed to loop through its own syntax until, eventually, it died. What would that soliloquy's themes be? Well, land and water, birth and decay, and laughter unto death—how a story keeps us rapt until the very end. ♦

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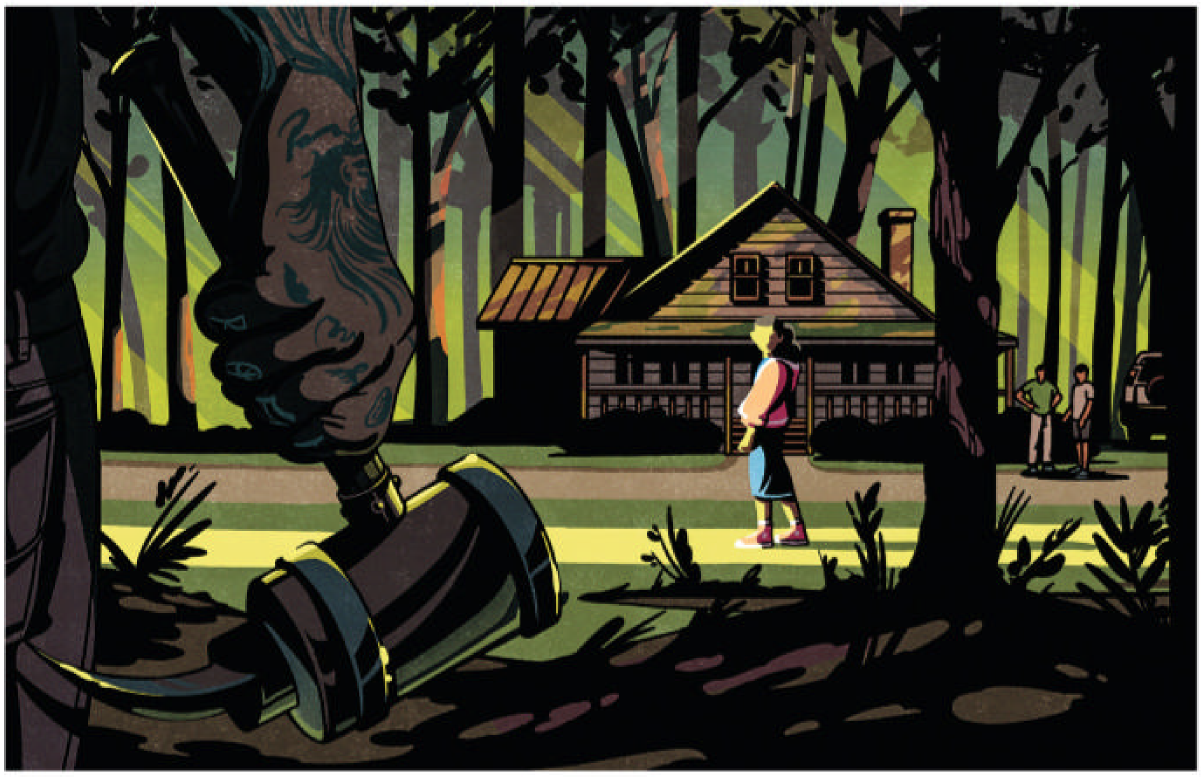
THE CURRENT CINEMA

AT LARGE

“Knock at the Cabin” and “Godland.”

BY ANTHONY LANE

Nothing would induce me to reveal what happens in “Knock at the Cabin,” the new film from M. Night Shyamalan. Nothing, that is, except for the fact that Shyamalan has already given away the basics of the plot in a couple of candid trailers. When did he become so generous in spilling the beans? Remember, this is the guy who made “The Sixth Sense” (1999), which held on tight to its beans right up to the final spill.



Dave Bautista and Kristen Cui star in M. Night Shyamalan’s film.

The new movie springs from a 2018 novel, Paul Tremblay’s “The Cabin at the End of the World,” so readers of the book, at least, will arrive at the cinema well versed in the terrors to come. For anyone else, here goes: a seven-year-old girl, Wen (Kristen Cui), goes on vacation with her fathers, Eric (Jonathan Groff) and Andrew (Ben Aldridge). They have taken a remote but cozy dwelling, on a lake, in rural Pennsylvania. This is a clear case of asking for trouble, given that earlier Shyamalan shockers, like “Signs” (2002) and “The Village” (2004), are set in similar seclusion. The happy holiday, in “Knock at the Cabin,” is interrupted by four strangers, who bring rusty tools and unwelcome news: the family must kill one of its own—Eric, Andrew, or Wen. Without such a sacrifice, all of humanity will perish. No big deal.

The chief of the invaders is a teacher named Leonard. He is played by Dave Bautista, who wears spectacles, presumably to indicate that he is, contrary to appearances, a thoughtful soul. You might as well dangle a pine-scented air freshener from the barrel of a tank. Yet there *is* a shade of gentleness in his opening scene, which is at once the least violent and the most affecting passage in the movie—a demonstration of what Shyamalan can still do, with aplomb, when moved by the spirit of menace. We see Leonard in long shot, emerging from a crowd of trees and, from Wen’s point of view, hard to make out. (She is busy gathering grasshoppers and trapping them in a jar. Symbolism alert!) Coming up close, Leonard towers over her, before shaking hands and explaining that he wants to be her friend. “My heart is broken,” he tells her, “because of what I have to do today.” The creepiness is all the more insistent for being so rueful and polite. The camera catches Wen at oblique angles, on the slant, as if she, and everything she knows, is about to be turned upside down.

Wen runs inside and alerts her fathers, who barricade every point of entry and prepare to repel the intrusion. Nice try. Before long, they are trussed up and confronted with Leonard and his little helpers: Sabrina (Nikki Amuka-Bird), a nurse; Adrienne (Abby Quinn), a cook; and Redmond (Rupert Grint), who works for a gas company. I wish that I could watch the leading actors from the “Harry Potter” franchise without being nagged by memories of their collective past, but I can’t. Grint will forever be Ron Weasley, and so, in Shyamalan’s new film, however savagely Redmond brandishes his lethal weapon, you keep expecting Wen to shout, “Drop it, Ron! Expelliarmus!”

So, what binds this unlikely quartet of doom? Well, they have all experienced visions that summoned them to the sylvan glade and compelled them to issue the fateful challenge. As a driving cause, this sounds a bit flimsy, and, to begin with, Eric and Andrew assume that they’ve been targeted by apocalyptic fruitcakes—or, perhaps, by militant homophobes, angry at same-sex marriage. (There is a narrative wrinkle that supports this thesis, if only for a while.) Hang on, though. No sooner have Eric and Andrew refused to play the sacrificial game, if that’s what it is, than the TV in the cabin starts to show tidal waves pounding the West Coast and planes falling out of the sky. Could it be that Leonard and his fellow-prophets are not talking nonsense, after all? Eric, for one, is half persuaded. “I saw something,” he says. “There was something in the light.”

This is scarcely the first occasion on which Shyamalan has laced a story with religious flavoring. Think of the former minister, in “Signs,” who eventually returns to the fold, or of the writer, in “Lady in the Water” (2006), whose wise words will allegedly inspire a future savior of the land. (Shyamalan cast himself as the writer. Not his finest hour.) No surprise, then, that “Knock at the Cabin” feels so portentous. The score, by Herdís Stefánsdóttir, is a kind of musical thundercloud, and the dialogue has

ILLUSTRATION BY MAXIME MOUYSSET

an oracular growl to match. According to Leonard, "God's finger will scorch the Earth"—not, I suspect, a line that Bautista, once a pro wrestler, used *that* often in the W.W.E. If this is his subtlest role to date, it's because Leonard seems so pained at his own jeremiads, tamping down any hint of swagger and unwilling to crow over the end of days. He's ready to rumble, but he's sorry.

Regrettably, the other characters have no such claim on our attention, and, for some reason, the movie doesn't cling and stick as it should. A film like Jeff Nichols's "Take Shelter" (2011), which told of another family under threat, and which was no less littered with omens of Armageddon, including tsunamis, had far more staying power. One problem is that too much of "Knock at the Cabin" takes place *in* the cabin; at times, it has the smack of a well-made play, or, at any rate, a technical exercise in dread. Shyamalan, to be fair, has lost none of his compositional devilry; notice his bisecting of the screen with clean vertical lines—the trunk of a tree, or the edge of a shower curtain, behind which somebody may or may not lurk. But these frights are not enough to fill a tale, and they are padded out, to minimal effect, by flashbacks to the precalamity lives of Eric, Andrew, and Wen. Like we care.

Thanks to "The Sixth Sense," the first thing that people ask about any Shyamalan film is: How's the twist? This is a serious matter. No jolt is more intoxicating to the moviegoer than that of being fooled, and, as one of the dumbasses who failed to spot the payoff coming in "The Village," I prayed for more of the same in "Knock at the Cabin," and lingered until the twilight of the end credits, just in case. So, was satisfaction delivered, or should audiences brace themselves for the bummer of a twistless thriller? I couldn't possibly comment.

To flee from the gulping claustrophobia of "Knock at the Cabin" into the open spaces of "Godland," a new movie written and directed by Hlynur Pálmason, should be a blessed escape. If you can't breathe freely in the wilds of Iceland, where most of the story is set, where can you? A waterfall, measureless to man, dwarfs two figures who stand at its base and rejoice in its spray; a bare foot, in closeup, sinks into a green sponge of wet moss. The strange thing is that, as the film unfolds, the beauty of the place grows ever more unforgiving. It resembles another planet, fresh from the act of creation, but it feels like a prison.

A youthful priest named Lucas (Elliott Crosset Hove), bony and bewildered, is sent from Denmark to Iceland, where a church is to be built before the assault of winter. We are, I would guess, in the middle of the second half of the nineteenth century, given that Lucas, an eager photographer, takes with him a crate-size camera and a box of large glass plates—such fun for the horses that have to carry his stuff. He could have sailed to his destination, a coastal community, but he's determined, as he says, to "get to know" the country.

He has his wish. If you really want to improve your knowledge at ground level, there's nothing like sliding from your saddle as you ride, brawling on rocks beside the sea, or tumbling into treacle-thick mud in your devotional robes. Those are but some of Lucas's trials. Being a Danish speaker, he must also contend with the Icelandic tongue, which, as he discovers, has a long—and necessary—list of words for "rain." More galling than anything, though, is the abrasion of Lucas's faith. Lying in his tent, and lighting a candle, he addresses the Almighty, saying, "You need not be here."

"Godland" is split into two parts. Having survived his trek across the interior, with the help of his wise and all but indestructible guide, Ragnar (Ingvar Sigurðsson), Lucas reaches the haven of a home. His host is Carl (Jacob Hauberg Lohmann), who lives there with his children, Anna (Vic Carmen Sonne) and Ída—played by the director's own daughter, Ída Mekkín Hlynsdottír, and so rosy with health and good humor that she rebukes the punitive gloom that envelops Lucas like a mist. Posing for a photograph, Ída sprawls full-length along the back of her shaggy pony, as if on a comfortable couch. Such is one secret of this extraordinary film, and of its power to exhilarate: the shock of emotional vigor, arising from the continual rub of physical texture and effort. These folk, under siege from the elements, fight back. Thus, beside the church, in the course of communal festivities, Lucas is cajoled into wrestling first with Carl and then with the mighty Ragnar, under the gaze of Anna and Ída. They could be watching Jacob and the Angel. Like trees, however, angels rarely prosper here, at the volcanic end of the world. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mick Stevens, must be received by Sunday, February 19th. The finalists in the January 30th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 6th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

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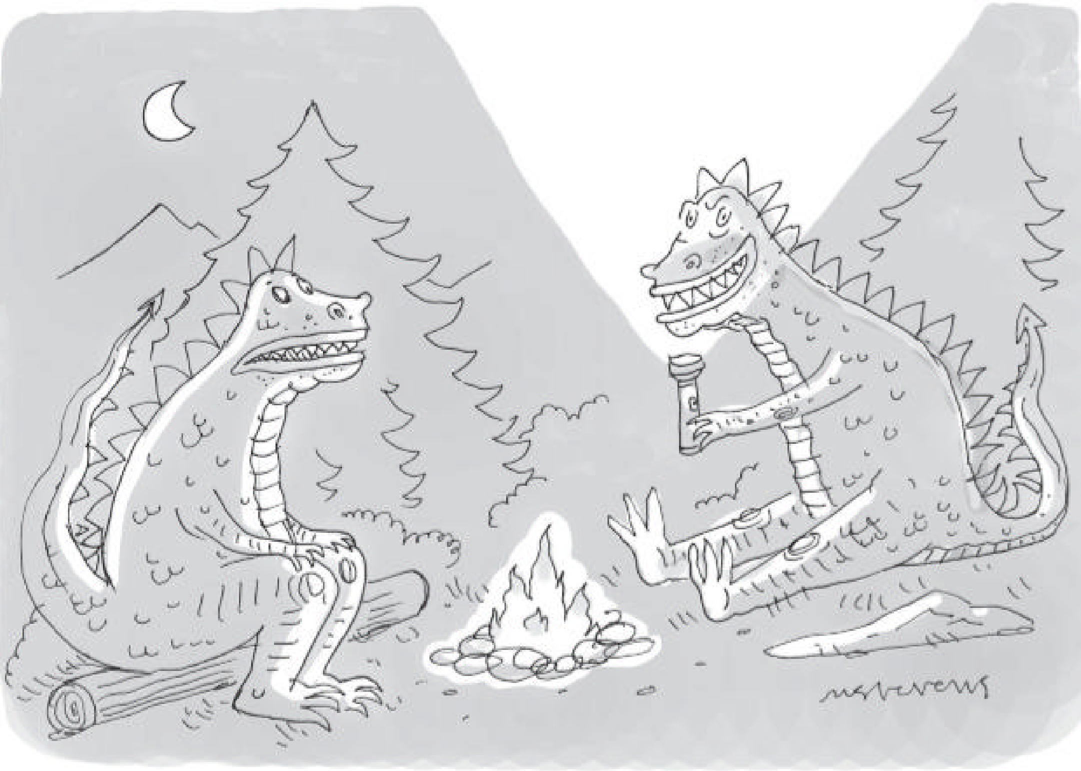

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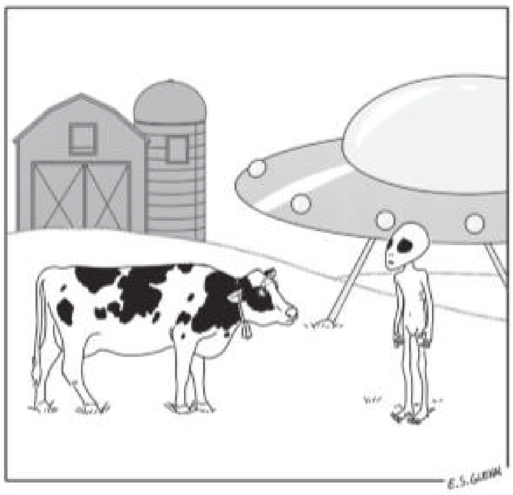
THE FINALISTS

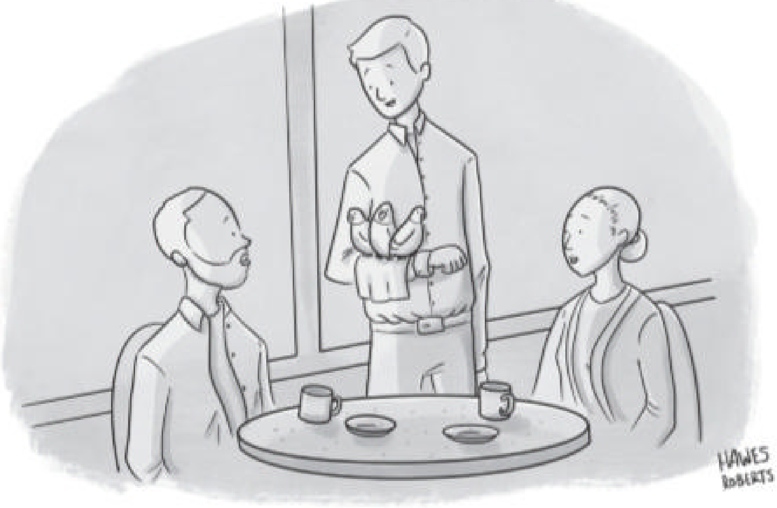


“And you'll be able to jump over our moon whenever you want.”
R. J. Surrette, West Dennis, Mass.

“You're standing right where I want to put the crop circle.”
Suzanne Westphal, Mill Valley, Calif.

“And then they drink it?”
Colin Guthrie, Ottawa, Ont.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Your eggs should be out any minute now.”
Samantha Schnell, New York City

With access to reproductive choice

THIS GIRL COULD

HELP FIND SOLUTIONS TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS

In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, a girl is 50X more likely to give birth before she's 18 than finish secondary school. Early and unintended pregnancies rob girls of their education. MSI is working to change this.
We are providing access to services and information so that adolescent girls can make informed decisions about their bodies and their futures. Choice gives girls opportunities to stay in school which helps them, their families and their communities build resilience and better adapt to climate change to be part of the solution. And that's good for all of us.

WILL YOU HELP GIRLS STAY IN SCHOOL?

Your gift of $27 per month will provide ten girls with four years of contraception and the opportunity to continue their education and become engineers, doctors, teachers or whatever they choose.

MSI UNITED STATES | Make reproductive choice possible.

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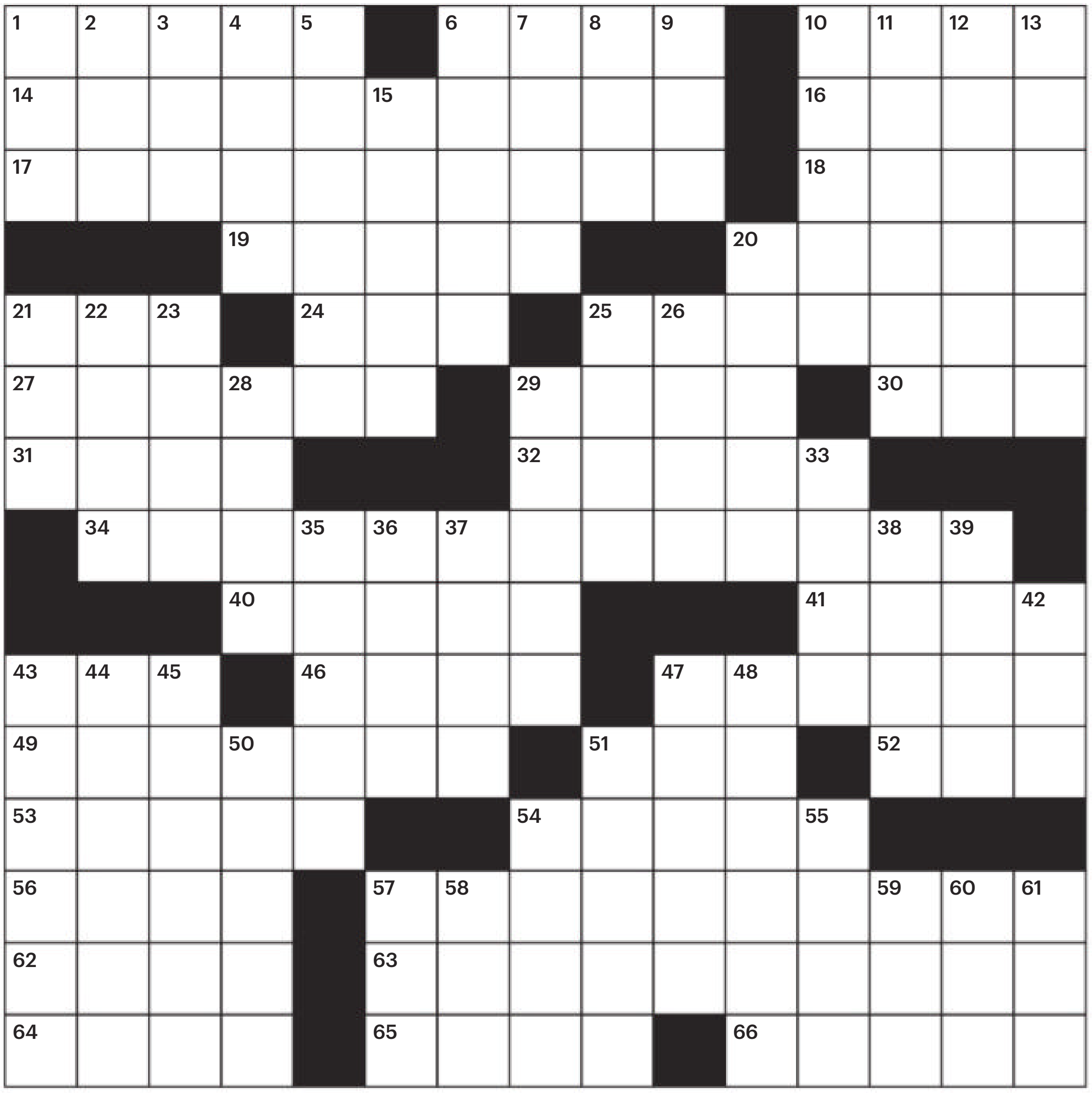
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

OVERHEARD IN . . .

A themed anniversary crossword.

BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB AND CAITLIN REID



ACROSS

- 1 Interjected
- 6 Sandwich often cut into quarters
- 10 Round figures
- 14 Salvador Dalí, for one
- 16 Cut (back)
- 17 *“Traffic on the 405 was gnarly”
- 18 Like watered-down soup
- 19 Mammal with a coat that changes color in the winter
- 20 Kites, e.g.
- 21 Prop in “Antony and Cleopatra”
- 24 Hill worker?
- 25 *“Ope, we’ve got a gapers’ block”
- 27 *“Youse guys get a load of this jawn?”
- 29 Sick in bed, with “up”
- 30 Oscar winner for the song “Fight for You,” from “Judas and the Black Messiah”
- 31 Cinematic pooch carried in a basket
- 32 Posed
- 34 Something stirring up local buzz . . . or an apt way to describe this puzzle’s starred clues
- 40 Bad news for an embezzler
- 41 Lady ___
- 43 Fingers, for short
- 46 All wrapped up
- 47 *“Wicked pissah!”
- 49 *“ ’Ey, I’m walkin’ here!”
- 51 Initials on some protest posters
- 52 J.F.K.’s protection detail?
- 53 Sign of spring?
- 54 Sealed, in a way
- 56 Kelly of morning TV
- 57 *“*Laissez les bons temps rouler!*”
- 62 No longer sweet on
- 63 What everybody knows that nobody’s supposed to know
- 64 Forms a kind of union
- 65 Item in a magic kit
- 66 Game piece

DOWN

- 1 Much of the dialogue in “CODA,” e.g.
- 2 Twosome
- 3 Some E.R. professionals
- 4 Notable spans
- 5 Kind of insurance
- 6 Half of a soccer player’s pair
- 7 Melodic cadence
- 8 “It’s no ___!”
- 9 Boy band whose fans are called its ARMY
- 10 ___ nerve (carrier of impulses from the retina to the brain)
- 11 Full of enthusiasm
- 12 Brooklyn, for one
- 13 Motion detector, e.g.
- 15 Word that comes from a Greek term meaning “the struggle to win a contest”
- 20 Product made by the brand Tushy
- 21 Abbr. on some residential addresses
- 22 Swig of something hard
- 23 It might be filled with falafel
- 25 Plastic alternative
- 26 Explore Yosemite, say
- 28 1970 hit that’s parodied by Weird Al’s “Yoda”
- 29 Hot spot for some art
- 33 Chili ___ (messy treats)
- 35 “Congrats!”
- 36 Pronounced feature of lutefisk and durian
- 37 Rat ___ (squealer)
- 38 Unit approximately equal to 1/746 horsepower
- 39 Greenpeace and others, for short
- 42 “The Gray Man” actress de Armas
- 43 Lined up
- 44 Logically determine
- 45 Pilfered
- 47 Censors, in a way
- 48 Dish that might be served with hash browns
- 50 Trips around the sun
- 51 Towheaded
- 54 Journalist Ifill
- 55 Art ___
- 57 At this very moment
- 58 Clean-air-and-water org.
- 59 Vessel for a couples’ cruise?
- 60 Lead-in to a maiden name
- 61 Train stop: Abbr.

Solution to the previous puzzle:

D	A	D	S	■	■	D	I	A	L	■	F	E	E	L
E	S	A	I	■	M	O	N	T	I	C	E	L	L	O
B	I	R	D	S	A	N	C	T	U	A	R	I	E	S
T	R	E	■	P	I	T	H	Y	■	C	R	A	V	E
■	E	D	S	E	L	■	■	■	P	H	A	S	E	■
S	C	E	N	E	S	T	E	A	L	E	R	■	■	■
H	A	V	O	C	■	O	L	G	A	■	I	N	T	O
E	L	I	■	H	E	M	L	I	N	E	■	O	E	D
A	L	L	S	■	V	E	I	L	■	L	O	R	C	A
■	■	■	P	R	A	I	S	E	W	O	R	T	H	Y
■	G	R	O	A	N	■	■	■	H	I	G	H	S	■
A	L	O	U	D	■	O	A	S	E	S	■	S	T	E
C	A	S	T	I	N	G	D	I	R	E	C	T	O	R
T	R	E	E	O	F	L	I	F	E	■	P	A	C	O
S	E	N	D	■	L	E	N	T	■	■	A	R	K	S

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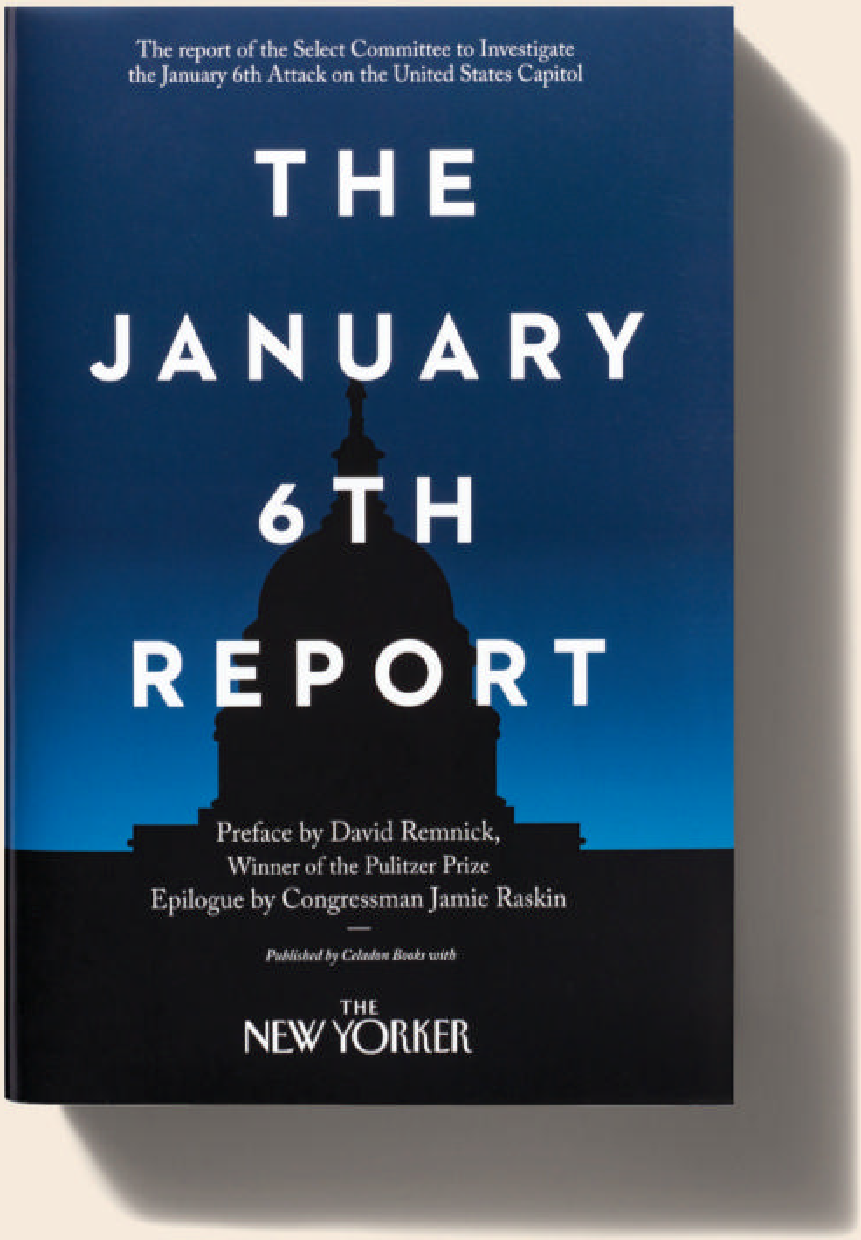
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